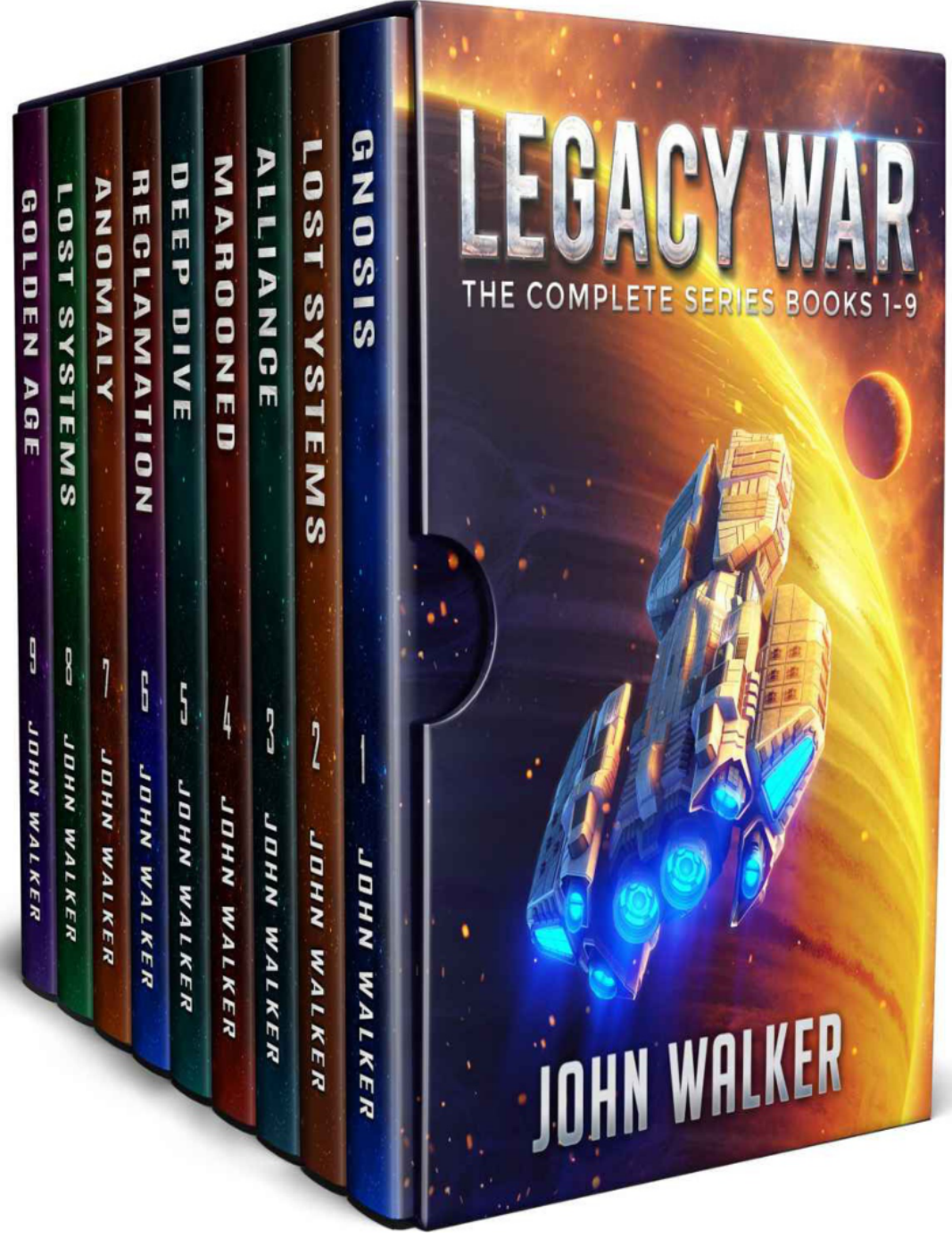

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Legacy War
The Complete Series
Books 1-9

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John Walker

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Gnosis: Legacy War Book 1

A Surprise attack.

Technology has allowed humanity to take to the stars. Earth's first step toward exploring the unknown universe begins with a surge of hope followed by the sting of a surprise attack. Just as their most advanced ship embarks on its maiden voyage, aliens assault the unprepared fleet, making a play for an ancient technology the human race has relied upon for all major advances.

This sudden meeting proves humans are not the only sentient beings in the vastness of space and it quickly becomes clear they will need to thwart the plans of their new enemies. If they do not, our first foray into the unknown could well be our last.

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Chapter 1

Captain Desmond Bradford leaned forward, willing the ship to move faster. They had received reports of the attack less than twenty minutes earlier and were well on their way back to Earth. Hyperspace made distances meaningless but travel was not instantaneous. The maiden voyage of the Gnosis took them to the edge of the solar system.

Another ten minutes would see them return home.

Experience told him every second counted when it came to combat and the defense force needed them. Though the other ships were certainly capable, the Gnosis was the most powerful ship in the fleet. The best experimental technology made up the offensive and defensive capabilities of the vessel, making it ideal for the intended purpose of exploration.

And just on the verge of our first trip, an unknown enemy force attacks Earth. Desmond narrowed his eyes. Who could it be? The unification put the old conflicts to rest a long time ago. They can't possibly be gunning for the Orb … can they?

The view screen showed the glowing yellow-green pulse light of hyperspace. Faster-than-light travel made for an incredible light show as they rocketed through what scientists call an alternate dimension. An intense, focused burst of energy allowed them to enter then hurtle themselves well beyond the speed of light.

"Sixty seconds to destination," Lieutenant Salina Gold announced from the science station. She wore her brown hair in a tight bun, her face set in a neutral, professional expression. "Scan data coming through now. Enemy ships number ten and are hitting orbital defenses as well as the fleet."

"Thank you," Desmond said. He turned to Commander Vincent Bowman sitting to his right. His first officer's blue eyes were narrowed in concentration, his nearly shaved blond hair spiking in the middle of his head. "Who do you think we're racing to fight?"

"Can't say," Vincent replied. "Maybe some fringe from the Eastern

Coalition? But where would they get the equipment? Anything capable of standing against our defenses would need some serious tech. Stolen maybe?"
Desmond shook his head. "I didn't hear anything about missing gear in any briefing I've attended."
"We're about to find out one way or another." Vincent shrugged. "I hope we're ready."
"Emerging from hyperspace now, sir." Salina called. "Control transferring to Lieutenant Commander Caplan in five … four … three … two … one …"
As the light show faded and they emerged into normal space, a chaotic battle raged dead ahead. Ships from the Earth fleet clashed with unusual vessels unlike any Desmond had ever seen. He gestured to Salina but he knew she was already performing a full scan of their opponents.
Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan was the ship's pilot and one of the best in the fleet. He could've been Vincent's brother with his light hair and blue eyes though he was a bit shorter and more slight. He'd been a fighter pilot before moving into the helmsman station and his flying instincts served him well in the new role.
"Permission to engage?" Zach asked, hands poised to follow the order.
Desmond would've preferred to wait for some more intel but the fleet's SOS made it clear they needed help immediately. The Gnosis had to get in the fight immediately or risk losing good men and women.
"Granted," Desmond said. "Close to range and target the closest enemy. Be nimble though. When the scans complete, we may need to change up our tactics."
"Captain," Salina spoke up quickly. "I'm picking up odd readings from the hulls of these ships. They have shields, like ours, but theirs are deflecting my ability to receive system information. I highly recommend we use beam weapons to disrupt their defenses before employing our mass drivers."
Desmond watched the screen as the enemy ships fired blue beams at the Earth fleet. The weapons caused their shields to light up but didn't

immediately pierce them. Wherever they came from, they weren't giants so it gave him some faith that they'd be able to fend them off. However, they clearly came with some advantages if they could deflect scans.

The attackers numbered at twelve large ships, each one holding their own against two to one odds with the Earth fleet. At first glance, it appeared the fight might be even but it only took a few moments to see the invaders had an advantage. They were soaking incoming shots and dishing out a nearly continuous assault.

The ship rumbled and he turned to Salina again. Her hands flew over the controls at her panel, the touch screen causing a quiet, dull thump with every finger stroke. "We just experienced the wake of a stray attack. None of the enemy ships have engaged us as of yet. They are too occupied with the fleet."

"Hit them, Zach," Desmond said. "Fire at will. Draw their fire away from our allies."

The Gnosis had the best defenses in the fleet. While they didn't know what to expect from the attacks of their enemies, Desmond knew they could weather a direct assault for longer. As they rapidly approached the fray, he sat back down and braced himself for what came next. He was about to conduct a major battle in an untested ship with a crew that had worked together for barely six months.

Thank God everyone's well trained.

The deck trembled slightly as Zach fired the beam weapons. Orange light lanced forward and struck one of the targets, slamming them hard enough to penetrate their defenses and cause the hull to spark. Desmond hadn't anticipated their attack being so successful immediately. Everything he had studied about shields suggested they should've repelled the strike.

"They have fighters," Salina said. "I'm picking up smaller vessels attacking our orbital defense systems."

"Vincent, how long to deploy interceptors?"

Vincent checked his computer before replying. "Our pilots were standing by from when we got the distress call. Hangar control reports they can be out there in less than two minutes."

“Launch when ready.” Desmond gestured to the screen, redirecting his focus. “Hit that same target with the mass drivers before they can retaliate.”

Mass drivers threw chunks of metal, propelling them at hypersonic speed. As a barrage battered the hull of the enemy, pieces of the target began to break off and sail into space. The vessel popped a moment later, destroyed from their attacks.

“Okay, we can handle these guys,” Desmond said. “Zach, acquire your next target and fire. Salina, do you have a full scan of what they’re putting out?”

“They have a similar energy signature to our own,” Salina replied. “I suspect we hit one which diverted power to weapons. We may not have as easy a time with other ships in their fleet. And the fighters are also quite advanced. I advise caution to our own pilots. They’ll want to fly defensively I suspect, at least until they fully understand the capabilities of their opponents.”

“Vincent, convey that to our pilots,” Desmond said, “and provide command oversight throughout the engagement there. I want them away from our orbital defenses. I’ll take care of the capital ship situation.”

“The orbital defenses are firing back,” Salina announced. “But they seem to be unable to calculate proper lead to hit the smaller ships.”

“Something to keep in mind as we do a retrospective on this fight,” Desmond replied. “Zach, time to next target.”

Zach hummed. “Five seconds … and we’ll be in range of several of them at that point.”

“Keep your targeting tight,” Desmond said. “We’ll move through them as quickly as we can but getting them from two angles should definitely tip the scales. Salina, have you been in contact with our people yet? Did anyone try to talk before this broke out? Or was it a total sneak attack?”

“No communication occurred before the attack,” Salina reported. “They emerged from hyperspace near the moon, closed the distance and fired. Their initial entry gave our fleet time to intercept. We received the distress call the moment the enemy showed up and began

ignoring hails."
"Which is why we were here right when it started," Desmond said. "Thank you. Vincent, report on fighters?"
"Mustang Squadron is our first response unit. Raptor's up next and will cover them." Vincent tapped his screen before continuing. "We're holding bomber units in reserve at this time."
"They shouldn't be needed." Desmond watched as they fired their beam weapons again. This time, the enemy's shields held firm. He nodded. Salina was right, and they figured it out quickly too. They know we're hitting them with some heavy ordnance and they also have the means to defend against it. This fight won't be as cut and dry as I hoped. "Keep it up, Zach."
The enemy ship disengaged from the Earth fleet to put more attention on the Gnosis. As it tried to acquire a firing solution, Zach fired again, this time doubling up energy blasts with a mass driver barrage. The two together caused superficial damage but enough to give the Earth fleet some confidence.
A beam weapon struck the Gnosis in the bow, making the shields flash bright enough to make the screen go temporarily white. Desmond winced and turned to Salina, waiting for her report on their defenses. She shook her head, not bothering to look up to offer her analysis. "Defenses held. Shield power drained to eighty percent in that one blast. Recharging now."
If they concentrated their fire, they could be dangerous. Especially if they hit a single point. Desmond nodded and let Zach do his job, returning fire again. The brawl might last longer than they wanted and he needed to start thinking of alternative tactics rather than keep exchanging fire. Maybe they'd need the bombers after all.
"I'm receiving a message from high command," Salina said. "They are …" She went silent, drawing Desmond's attention.
"What is it?"
"The aliens have attacked Gamma Alpha."
Desmond's stomach flipped at the thought. Gamma Alpha might've been the single most well defended structure on the entire planet. It held the Orb and though plenty of potential intruders attempted to

access the base, they all failed. Could they repel whoever these invaders were? It really depended on their weapons … and how many they sent.

“They are requesting help from us,” Salina said. “From our expeditionary troops.”

Desmond nodded. “Get them on a shuttle and have Raptor escort them through this mess. If they’re asking for help, that’s not good.”

I’ve been to Gamma Alpha. The gun emplacements alone should be enough to drive any ground force off. What did they bring to get through there? I guess we’ll find out soon enough. This orbital attack might be a ruse to get what they want down there. I guess we’re fighting a battle on three fronts. Time to earn our pay.

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden launched first, providing what he hoped to be solid leadership to the rest of his Mustang unit. They’d trained together, flying simulations and formation work for the past six months, but none of them had seen actual combat as a team. Today, they would be tested.

Some of them had fought in earlier conflicts with inferior technology with different units. Dennis brawled with separatists over Australia when he’d been out of flight school for less than a month. Back then, they kept things mostly in atmosphere against opponents they easily understood, other human beings with similar equipment.

The briefing for this fight stated they would be taking on what command believed to be alien invaders. Their ships certainly didn’t match the Earth variety. Checking his scanner, he brought up the silhouettes. Rounded with a thorn like protrusion on one side and thrusters opposite it, they appeared to be highly maneuverable and quick.

In contrast, the interceptors Dennis and his squadron flew went with a variable swept wing approach to allow for trans-atmospheric flight. They could tuck them in during especially tight maneuvering and their weapons came from the stubby nose or the body itself. Three

thrusters provided rear propulsion and dozens of micro thrusters gave them their alternative motion.
The other five came out behind him, forming up in a wide vanguard. Their orders were to help defend the orbital defense systems, which weren't able to keep up with the smaller attackers. Commander Bowman told them to observe prior to attack, giving them a warning about the advanced technology they might be facing.
Dennis did so on their way to the operational theater, altering his attention between his scanner's high resolution images and the path directly in front of him. The enemies were fast and maneuverable, climbing and banking around energy blasts that might've destroyed them with a single shot if they became careless.
Speaking of which, we need to have the orbital defenses settle down when we're in range. I don't want to have a friendly fire incident.
He tried to ping orbital defense control but an error appeared on his screen, some kind of low level interference. Redirecting his signal back to the ship, he got through but not without a liberal amount of static. "This is Mustang One to Gnosis Control. Can you boost your gain? The connection out here is terrible."
"This is Commander Bowman. We'll do what we can from here."
"Thank you, sir. I can't reach Orbital either. Can you make sure they crank down when we get there?"
"Friend or foe should be active," Commander Bowman replied. "We'll do what we can from here though. Time to engagement?"
"Um …" Dennis glanced at the scanner and frowned. "They're coming our way." An energy beam flew past his cockpit and he jogged to the right, putting a little more distance from it. His heart beat a little faster but he maintained his composure, and replied in an even tone, "Contact. Enemy has engaged."
"Fire at will," Commander Bowman said. "Repeat, fire at will."
Dennis signaled the rest of his squadron just as more shots grazed his shields. He initiated evasive maneuvers, spinning and falling into a dive. His wingman, Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring followed suit as the rest of his unit broke off into pairs. The fight kicked into high gear, energy beams lighting up the space all around them.

The targeting computer failed to secure a connection with the enemy ships. Scans indicated they were giving off some kind of radiation, a field interfering with the connection. “We’re doing this the old fashioned way, folks.” Dennis spoke over the com. “Save your missiles and stick to guns and beams. You’ll probably have to get pretty damn close.”

“Yeah, I can’t get a lock,” Shane said. “You think that’s part of their defenses?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lieutenant Hal Brown, Mustang Three, called out. “My computer can’t get through it. I’m engaging.”

Dennis glanced to the right and saw his ally make an attack run with Lieutenant Kate Zeller, his wingman, close behind. They both strafed their target, blasting away with mass driver cannons before pulling up and away, parting at the last second. A blue field erupted around their opponent, shields taking direct damage before fading back to a dull haze.

Shane began firing, throttling up to overtake him. His attack made the enemy pull up and rocket off and Dennis maneuvered to follow. He fell in behind his target’s thrusters, blue ovals that made a fantastic focus. They tried to shake him, moving to the left and right but he timed it, firing a blast to get his bearings.

A clean miss gave him some perspective and he tilted the stick for a better shot. As the enemy continued its pendulum-like motion, he fired again, this time scoring a direct hit. The mass drivers pounded the shields and nudged the ship enough to break its motion cycle. He fired his beams this time, holding down the trigger and sweeping to the left.

The attack cut across his focus, blasting the shields and making them shatter like energized glass. Shane followed up with mass drivers and with nothing to stop them, the enemy engines were annihilated. The pilot ejected, his pod hurtling off into space but they didn’t have time to worry about it. Two more invaders engaged them and they had to go defensive again.

Mustang five and six called out their own adventure as they buzzed one of the orbital defenses, buying themselves some distance before

spinning around and taking another ship out. Hal called a mayday but before they could even get a fix on his position, he shouted into the microphone. “I’ve been hit! Direct hit! Ejecting! Ejecting!”

A massive explosion brightened Dennis’s cockpit to the left and he looked over just in time to see the bits of Hal’s ship go flying into nothingness. “Form up, people! Gnosis Control, where the hell is Raptor? This is crazy out here.”

“They’re escorting drop shuttles,” Commander Bowman said. “Do your best until they get back.”

“Escorting …” Dennis shook his head. “What for? Where?”

“Enemy forces are attacking Gamma Alpha.” Dennis’s heart nearly stopped when he received the news. “We’re sending troops down to stop them.”

“Understood.” Dennis sighed. “You heard that, everyone. We have to make this happen. Remain evasive and take shots as you can. Opportunities will present themselves but take risks sparingly. Our first mission should not be our last.”

Another set of enemy ships took shots at them, smacking the shields hard. Dennis’s ship shook and an alarm went off. Automated repair systems kicked in and rerouted power as necessary. He spun to the right and fired blind, hoping a random act might make them break off. It seemed to work because another assault didn’t come.

One of the orbital defenses exploded, adding to the overall chaos of the scene. All of Mustang reformed, staying far enough apart to avoid splash damage from an incoming attack. This presented the enemy with an opportunity Dennis hoped they’d take and as three ships came around to take on their tail, he ordered Mustang Four and Five to dive and attack.

The two ships went down while the other three pulled up. They spun around and met the enemy as they attempted their own evasive maneuvers. More attacks filled space, a wild melee breaking out between all the ships. There was enough ordnance floating around to make standard visual almost impossible.

Something blew nearby and Dennis prayed it wasn’t one of his people.

“Target eliminated,” Flying Officer Alicia Quinn, Mustang Five,

announced. “The other two are falling back and we’ve got three on Orbital Satellite Seven.”
“Let’s get over there and drive them off,” Dennis said. “It’s more important we keep those alive than fighting these jerks.”
They redirected their course, advancing to full speed. The magnetic inertial dampeners made the transition easy on the body but there was still enough gravitational pressure to make Dennis know they were really hauling ass. As they closed the distance, the satellite came into view and continued to grow as they approached.
The stationary weapons fired wildly but continued to miss. The enemy proved too agile to take down. Dennis fired as soon as he was remotely in range and he nicked his target in the tail. This caused the opponent to redirect and fly straight toward him. Great, chicken time. Dennis fired the mass drivers even as his foe let loose with energy beams.
They hit each other but the mass drivers won this round. The enemy shields faltered and the nose took a direct blow, shattering the metal and causing it to spin before the engines ignited and tore the entire hull apart. Dennis dove to avoid the debris but he didn’t quite escape every chunk. Some pieces burned up when tapping his shields.
“Careful with risks, huh?” Shane chuckled. “That looked pretty damn risky to me.”
“Yeah, I’m not smart,” Dennis replied. “So sue me. Get back in it.”
Another ship went down as Kate blasted away, tearing through the side of the shields and taking it apart. A panel popped off the enemy and slammed into her underbelly, causing her to spin for a moment before she regained control. “I’m okay,” she announced. “Minimal concussion damage. Automated systems are correcting now. Real combat’s taking a bit to get used to.”
Capital ships moved in their direction and Dennis knew if they had to engage those big guys, they’d be in a lot of trouble. The enemy had the advantage of defying their target locks. He doubted they suffered the same restriction. “We might need some bombers out here.”
Shane took out the final of three ships that were attacking the orbital defense satellite. “Why? We’ve got the hard points here. They can

repel those jerks."
"I kinda doubt it." Dennis scowled, looking for their next targets. "Looks like we've got some fighters moving on the Gnosis. Home base has better things to do than play with a bunch of gnats so follow me and prepare to engage. I want to clear that up before we move on to anything else."
He sent a waypoint to the others and once again accelerated to full throttle. They needed to get back there quickly if they hoped to make any difference in that particular fight. Already, they'd managed to put a dent in the enemy's assault. Providing they got Hal back with a search and rescue, they might even be able to call their battle successful.
But they had a long way to go before they could call it won.

***

Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow sat near the pilots in the shuttle as it made its way for Earth. Their escorts remained close enough to make out every detail of their frames just outside the window but they didn't seem to be needed. The mainstay of the enemy force fought over the orbital defenses and the Gnosis kept the bigger ships busy.
Getting there won't be the problem. What will we find when we arrive?
Communications with the surface were spotty due to some kind of powerful interference. The intelligence they had simply suggested an unknown force had attacked Gamma Alpha, where the Orb was kept. Orders came through suggesting surface security specifically requested a unit from the Gnosis should arrive and assist.
Geoff had been in the military for the better part of fifteen years. He applied for a ride on the Gnosis as soon as the post opened up and looked forward to the crazy stuff they'd discover. He liked the idea of exploration and understood the need for security in such situations. It seemed like they'd put war behind them a long time ago.
I guess someone had some other ideas about that. I hope this is an isolated incident.

“Heat!” Sergeant Lawrence Gorman called out. When Geoff joined up, his drill instructor shortened his surname, creating a lifelong handle that followed him to every post. “I’m still not getting through the interference for scans. We’re going in blind here. Any thoughts on what we might expect?”

The truth was simple. Heat had no idea what they were going to find down there other than a force large enough to drive back the security unit. If they were inside the base, automated defenses should’ve been slowing them down. He’d seen them in action, at least simulated, and no ground force should’ve been able to stand against them.

“I’m worried about their technology,” Heat said. “But our stuff is pretty good too. I imagine we’re going to have a sweep and clear situation then go home.”

“You think this might be an invasion?” Sergeant Alex Gillet asked. “An expeditionary force to test our defenses?”

“Seems to me they’re after the Orb,” Heat replied. “And if that’s so, they didn’t bring enough people because we’re not letting them have it. We’re breaking up into groups of three. Me, Gillet and Anderson are Sentinel One. Gorman, Dorian and Wheeler are two. Vine, Bosh and Kelly are three. You got it?”

The men all shouted out an affirmative and Heat returned to looking over his HUD, controlling it with the touch pad built into his glove. Their armor was power assisted, granting them the benefits of hydraulics for heavy lifting and even some pretty impressive jumps. Assisted by rocket packs, they could cover ground quickly, especially difficult terrain.

They carried heavy weapons, easily capable of puncturing armored transports or offensive vehicles like tanks. Each man also packed a couple of small missiles for taking out air threats. If there were something on the planet they weren’t prepared for, the situation would prove far more dire than they could handle on their own.

Heat put in a request for Raptor to remain as air support should they need it. The squadron leader replied an affirmative and they committed to flying the perimeter, ensuring no other enemies came in to flank them. This would afford the soldiers a little breathing room

and allow them to concentrate on the threat immediately in front of them.

The shuttle hit the atmosphere hard, piercing their re-entry window and plunging toward the surface. Panels rattled around them and the seats bucked. The safety harness held him in place, clinging tightly to the armor. It held him in place but didn't lessen the discomfort of the descent.

Getting there will be half the fun in this case. At least all we have to deal with here is being shaken. Once we're on the surface, the real fun begins and we get to test these fancy new weapons in a live combat exercise. I'd hoped for something more subtle for our first time out. Oh well.

"Thirty seconds." The pilot spoke in an even, bored tone over the com. He was referring to the time it would take to drop them off roughly two hundred feet above the ground. They would use their jump packs to safely land and approach the base. Each of them practiced the tactic hundreds of times but never while being shot at, not with live ammo at least.

Gorman and Dorian stood and released the safety mechanisms holding the ramp in place. They counted out ten before popping the hatch. The wind made the straps dance around but Heat's helmet cancelled out the noise. The rest of the men stood and prepared for the jump. Single file, they got the green light and started jumping.

Heat took up the rear, hopping out after the others. The rest of the unit looked like gray dots against white clouds. His HUD showed his altitude and it plunged, the number spinning wildly as it counted down toward zero. He knew the cloud coverage should clear up in less than five seconds then they'd be getting rained on.

The computer stated the storm would likely pass before the hour was up. Hopefully, we'll be done with this mission by then.

All at once the clouds were gone and he saw Gamma Alpha. The facility itself was not overly large on the outside. Just a set of cement walls, barracks, automated defenses and a command center. Most of it was beneath the ground and built into the mountain. People worked and lived inside, studying the Orb and protecting it.

Heat saw orange-beam weapons firing from the Earth defenses as the enemy returned blue shots. His heartbeat picked up at the thought of combat, of getting into the action and taking them on. The coms cleared up a moment later and Gamma Alpha control sent out a wild mayday, the operator practically screaming.

“We hear you,” Heat said. “We’re almost there. What’s the sitrep?”

“We’re holding some of the invaders outside but at least three of them got through our defenses and are in the base. Our soldiers are struggling to push them back!”

“So you don’t need us at the front gate,” Heat replied. “You want us inside ASAP?”

“Yes, sir. Can you get through quickly?”

“Absolutely and we’ve got enough to help outside. Your corridors are too tight for all of us anyway.” Some of his men landed already and took up positions. Heat hit his pack and he slowed immediately, his body jostled by the sudden thrust. He landed in a crouch, weapon aimed outward.

They formed up and started toward the base and he gave them the briefing. He would lead Gillet and Anderson into the base. The others would tear through the remaining enemies outside. When he gave the order, the other six sprang into action, using their jets to cover the ground faster.

The enemy combatants were humanoid, perhaps a trifle taller than the average human. They wore some type of armor, blue in color and it shimmered. Scans indicated some kind of personal shield, something which might afford them one or two shots before they had to rely solely on the physical protection.

Sentinel Three plunged into the fight and started blasting away, firing their own beam weapons at the enemy from behind. The first one to take a hit stumbled forward, dropping to one knee. His shield saved his life but the next two shots, concentrated fire from multiple troops, cut through his armor and obliterated everything from the shoulders up.

That caused the invaders to fight their battle on two fronts, half their contingent turning to battle Sentinel Two and Three. As Heat and his

party jumped toward the entrance, he noted a number of bodies littering the ground. Twenty invaders mingled with perhaps forty humans. His scans indicated a few survived but they wouldn't for long, not even with medical attention.

What a mess.

They landed with a resounding crash just before the entrance, the doors smashed and lying on the ground several feet inside. Small guns smoked nearby and the cameras were also down. Heat readied his weapon and headed within, relying on his HUD to collect some intelligence data.

A few feet inside, a red light flashed in his helmet. He directed his attention to what could be causing it and found a system alert. The aliens were closing in on the final defenses of the Orb. Only three doors stood between them and the ultimate prize on Earth. Heat motioned for his men to double time it.

Their armor clashed with the metal floor, making a massive racket. The enemy would hear them coming but they didn't have time for stealth. Besides, calling Heat's crew in meant someone wanted a loud solution to a pressing problem. As they rounded a corner and passed by the bodies of defenders and the debris of broken defenses, anger began to build.

After the initial discovery of the Orb, several nations threatened to fight over what it represented and what it offered. Ultimately, the violence that nearly occurred brought them together. There was too much work for any one organization to accomplish alone. Collaboration advanced humanity by light years.

And now someone's coming to collect on a bill it seems.

Heat's HUD indicated violence up ahead. They paused at the corner and stacked up. When they stepped out into the hallway, they'd have full line of sight on five targets. Two of them were attempting to bypass the security with some kind of device. The others stood guard with their weapons held at the ready.

"Ready on three." Heat spoke into his com. Noise suppressors kept his voice from carrying and as he counted down, he saw the other two tense up for the fight. None of them knew precisely what would

happen if they were shot by the enemy's weapons. The unknown made the situation that much more intense. "Three … two … one."

The men darted out from their cover, leading with their weapons. Their targets were only startled for half a moment before the shooting began. Heat's first shot struck one of the enemies in the leg, causing him to stumble backward. The alien's attack went wide, striking the ceiling and causing sparks to rain down from a broken light fixture. Gillet took a shot to the chest. His armor held but the impact of the blow made him lose his balance. He dropped to one knee and fired his jump jet, a quick burst to keep him aloft. The gesture kept him from falling but he overshot and slammed into the ceiling, firing at the same time. The shot went wide but it grazed one of the aliens trying to get through the door.

A moment of chaos broke out as the aliens tried to take evasive action, preserving themselves for another few moments in the midst of the violence. As the conflict continued, Heat took three more shots, one to the shoulder, another to the leg and a final blow to his chest. The HUD showed minimal damage, the technology proving its worth.

"Incoming grenade!" Anderson shouted, firing his jets to hop backwards. Heat made a split second decision, realizing he'd very likely run into one of his allies if he followed suit. Dashing forward, he jammed the thrusters on and slammed into one of the aliens, taking him straight into the wall.

The body collapsed beneath the weight and momentum of his armor and as he moved away, the broken corpse slid to the floor. The explosion made him drop to his knees and he spun in place, ready to fire again. Gillet caught one of the targets in the head and the final one threw up his arms in surrender, his gun flying through the air.

"Station Two, this is Sentinel One," Heat said. "We've secured the area and have a prisoner, please respond."

"Sentinel One, this is two," Gorman replied. "All enemies neutralized and mop up complete. We are policing the bodies and preparing for a post op. Over."

"Good work. Get in touch with Gamma Alpha control and let them know we're ready to turn this place back over to them." Heat paused.

“And we’ll need some serious clean up down here.”
“Affirmative, sir. Sentinel two out.”

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Chapter 2

Desmond grabbed his chair to steady himself as enemy fire battered their shields. Salina called out that they had dropped down to thirty percent and started recharging. They'd been brawling with several of the enemies, exchanging shots and while the Gnosis proved to have a distinct advantage, the sheer number of vessels they stood against evened the odds.

"We've got a massive power surge from the marked alien vessel," Salina said. "I recommend a withdraw."

"Fall back," Desmond ordered. Zach slapped his controls and the ship lurched as it moved away. A bright blue flash filled the screen, moving in a sphere around the target. It bathed several of the Earth ships. Sparks danced away from each craft the field touched and their shields flared in a rainbow of colors.

When it touched the Gnosis, they were fairly far back. The ship lights dimmed briefly and came back firm. When the rumbling stopped, Desmond pointed at the screen. "Get us back in the action, Zach. Fire when ready but keep an eye on energy bursts. We'll need to pull away quickly if that happens again. Salina, damage report."

Salina hummed. "Aft thrusters require minor repairs from electrical shorts. All other systems are holding firm. Shields blocked the energy wave but they were drained. We're at thirty percent and charging fast. While we made it through with minimal impact, the fleet did not. I'm getting a com message about two of them abandoning ship."

"Damn." Desmond checked his own screen to see the rest. More than twelve enemies started the fight and they were now down to four. Earth lost two of their own and reports came in about extensive damage from the assault. He frowned as he read through the information. He needed a confirmation. "Why didn't the enemy take damage from their attack?"

"I can only speculate," Salina replied. "Their defenses are likely matched up to the energy field so when it bursts as it did, they absorb the attack and possibly even overpower their shields temporarily.

Further analysis will be required and it looks like we'll have plenty of debris to make the investigation easier."
Desmond nodded. "How many are combat effective still?"
"Three, including the one we just hit." Salina brought up a second image on the main view screen, a shot of a massive ordnance exchange. They watched as three Earth ships hammered one of the enemies, tearing through their shields and penetrating the hull. The ship went up a moment later. "Make that two."
Zach tapped his controls and called out, "I've targeted the one who did that sphere thing. Firing now."
The mass drivers popped off several rounds but the beams got there first, cutting into their shields. Each blow knocked them down just a little until the chunks of metal arrived to batter them like ancient rams in some castle siege. He immediately fired again and the second barrage tore through their shields.
They initiated their engines and tried to move off but it was too late to flee. Their engines were taken down a moment later and they began to drift. Desmond moved over to Salina's station and checked the scans, noting a different kind of power surge building in the enemy's hull. They weren't about to attack. Something was blowing up.
"They've had a power failure," Salina said. "Look …"
The ship burst like a balloon, pieces flying off in different directions. Some of the debris burned up in the atmosphere, the larger pieces glowing bright enough to be easily seen on screen.
Their last two ships tried to depart but the maneuverable Earth fleet gave chase. Desmond ordered Zach to follow as well though he knew full well they wouldn't get far. "Open a channel and hail these guys. Maybe we can get them to stand down and surrender. Also, where are we at with our fighters?"
"Orbital defenses are secure," Vincent said. "They engaged a small group of fighters en route to us a few minutes ago. They're taking care of them right now."
Salina spoke up. "No response on any channel, sir."
"They don't want to surrender," Zach said. "Escape or die, they're going for one or the other."

“I’d like to know why they even thought they could take us with such a small contingency,” Vincent said. “Did they not know our military capabilities?”
“Technically speaking,” Salina said, “they would’ve overwhelmed our fleet in a few minutes without our support. And the report I’ve received from Gamma Alpha suggests the aliens were able to breach the station and nearly made it to the Orb. Though our ships and defenses worked admirably, without us this could’ve been a catastrophe.”
“And it still wasn’t good,” Desmond replied. He watched as they performed concentrated fire on the last two ships. Hitting them with everything they had, the first one was taken down almost instantly. The last one went up all on its own, a clear suicide rather than risk being caught. “Fantastic. No one to question about this senseless attack.”
“Untrue, sir,” Salina said. “Sentinel One reports they have a prisoner.”
“Seriously?” Vincent looked up. “That’s great news! Right?”
Desmond nodded. “Language barrier aside, that’s better than we had a few moments ago. How’re the fighters doing?”
“They’ve mopped up, sir,” Vincent said. “When the larger enemy ships started to make a break for it, the fighters tried to escape. Showing our guys their tailpipes wasn’t a good idea.”
“Good. Let’s get some search and rescue going.” Desmond returned to his seat, leaning forward. “Get us in orbit, Zach. I have a feeling we’ll be here for a while. Launch shuttle teams when ready.”
“Captain,” Salina said, “I’ve got high command on the com. They’d like to talk to you right away.”
“Is it private?”
“No, sir.”
“Put them on screen.”
Admiral Garlan Reach was an older man in his sixties, with thin and close-cropped gray hair. His blue eyes were nearly gray and the lines on his face were just as much a testament to his career as the ribbons on his chest or the medals he wore beside them. His grave expression shifted to a slightly more friendly visage, a thin smile touching his

lips.
“I’m glad you got back in time, Desmond. Thanks for the rush.”
“The hyperspace trip back provided us an opportunity to test the system under stress,” Desmond said. “Much as I wish we didn’t have to find out, real combat for my people may not have been on the dance card but we at least know the systems work now. How’re things at Gamma Alpha? I guess our soldiers were able to get things in order.”
“Those aliens were able to tear through our defenses pretty well. Even when we were holding them, their technology … It seemed to be capable of negating some of our most advanced weapons. We’ve captured a great deal of it and will be analyzing it as quickly as possible. That’s why I’ve contacted you.”
Desmond’s brows lifted. “Okay … what do you need me to do, sir?”
“I’d like you to come down here as soon as possible. We’ve got a lot to talk about.” Garlan cleared his throat. “An agent from the AIA just arrived a few moments ago to help with this situation. Apparently, the moment our defenses were breached, they were alerted.”
“How’s that?”
“I don’t know.” Garlan scowled. “However, I intend to find out. Just get down here as quickly as you can and we’ll get to the bottom of this situation. Admiral Reach out.”
The screen went back to space and Desmond leaned back in his chair with a deep breath. The AIA stood for Applied Intelligence Association, a group that didn’t really advertise precisely what they did. They rarely got involved in the affairs of the military, at least not overtly or to Desmond’s knowledge. Whatever caught their interest about this encounter must’ve been big.
The Gnosis performed well during the fight and with minimal damage, Engineer Nathaniel Webber would easily get them back to normal in a few hours. Their enemy’s weapons concerned Desmond far more. The strange sphere and even their beam weapons were particularly nasty. Concentrated, they might’ve caused real damage to the ship.
They came thinking they’d get an easy fight and they attacked while we were pretty far away. Were they just waiting for their chance? Did

they know we might be capable of stopping them? And what were their motivations in the first place? Why even bother to attack a whole planet with so few ships?

The prisoner would be able to answer these questions if they could communicate with him. Perhaps that's why the AIA was involved. They might have methods to talk to the guy regardless of what language he spoke. Rumors about that organization ranged from the extraordinary to the absurd.

Desmond stood and gestured at Vincent. "You have the bridge, Commander. Salina, contact Lieutenant Quinn and have him relieve you. I'd like you to join me on the surface. Keep the search and rescue going and contact me if you have any problems. We'll be back soon." Hopefully with answers. No one's going to feel safe if we don't figure out the motivations of these invaders, and will this lead to something far worse than a skirmish? Lord knows we don't need another war.

***

Dennis and the rest of Mustang Squadron remained in the field until search and rescue located Hal's escape pod. They escorted the shuttle back to the Gnosis and landed at that point. When they disembarked, they found their squad mate took some bruises but otherwise made it out unscathed.

Thank God for small favors. They lingered around the medical bay, waiting for a debriefing order to come through. Shane leaned against the wall, hand pressed against his ear to listen to com traffic. He tilted his head and turned to the others. "I've got something interesting. Seems the captain is heading down to Gamma Alpha."

"Did they get that mess cleaned up?" Kate asked. "Or did he have to go down there himself to get those jar heads in line?"

Shane smirked. "They stopped the force trying to bust in, if that's what you're asking. Raptor's escorting his shuttle down to the surface now."

"Glad we didn't end up on milk run duty," Flying Office Corey Parks said. "I didn't sign up to follow around slow ass shuttles."

Dennis rolled his eyes before replying, “You signed up to do as you’re told but off the record, I’m glad we didn’t pull that duty. Of course, it’s a necessary service. VIPs need protection.”
“Those aliens,” Shane said, shaking his head, “they were after the Orb. If they got it … imagine what they would do to our technological race.”
“We’ve got some backups,” Corey said. “From what I heard, we’ve been trying to copy data off the thing for a while.”
“Yeah, but it’s not exactly easy,” Kate replied. “They said the storage capacity of the Orb is impossibly large. Copying it has also proven to be a challenge so people have to transcribe it. That’s why it’s so valuable and why we couldn’t let it fall into enemy hands.”
“You get anything else on the com?” Dennis asked. “Or are we done?”
Shane shrugged. “Just that Admiral Reach will be meeting them down there. Must be serious to bring out a guy like that.”
“No doubt.” Corey paced away, rubbing his chin. “Think we’ll see some more action then?”
“Those guys weren’t alone,” Dennis said. “There’re more of them somewhere and we’ll have to be ready. I doubt they’re giving up because we bloodied their nose once.”
“War then,” Flying Officer Alicia Quinn added. “We’ll be at war again.”
The comment silenced the ground but Dennis nodded in response. All of them thought about it but she was the only one to voice the concern. Whatever happened in the next few hours might mean the difference between digging in for a defensive run or heading out into the unknown reaches of space for a hunting expedition.
One way or another, the Gnosis would see some action soon. Dennis felt he and his team were ready.

***

Cassandra Alexander hated wearing her intelligence uniform. The white jacket slacks combo made her feel like an uptight socialite and the heeled shoes didn’t suit her. She’d always been far more practical

about her clothing and in that getup, she didn't dare touch any food or drink other than water.

The thin blouse beneath didn't provide enough padding between her skin and coat, making her shoulders and back itch. Wearing her dark hair in a tight bun, she looked like a woman ten years older when she peered into the mirror. At thirty-two, she did not enjoy the maturity of the look.

At least the assignment appealed to her. Gamma Alpha tended to be off limits to everyone and she'd only visited the Orb three times in the last six years. Each time required special permission and a couple escorts. Even as one of the foremost intelligence researchers of the data inherent in the device, she was expected to remotely access it. Which proved to be just as good in most cases.

The AIA helped with some of the systems on the experimental Gnosis vessel. Cassie provided the programming driving the computer systems and helped to direct how it interacted with the automatic repair and defense protocols. She hadn't known she was doing it until they asked her to look over the work but that was the nature of working for intelligence.

Everything's a secret until the very last possible moment.

Since finding out she worked on the Gnosis, she had been allowed to test the systems in simulation as well as deep dive better ways to do the programming next time. An update cycle was put into place and though she didn't build those packages, she got to approve them after viewing the testing information and speak to the workers involved.

The work may not have been what she expected when she left the elite Design Information academy in Geneva but it proved rewarding enough. Someone of her skill and graduation position could've walked out making an enormous salary at any of the tech firms around the world but the AIA appealed to her sense of human patriotism.

"Where else will you be allowed to make a huge difference for everyone? Do you really want to spend your entire life making gadgets for the wealthy? You should be doing important things and we want to help you get there. The caveats are you won't get as much money and you can't talk about your work but think of the personal

satisfaction."

The rhetoric almost didn't work until they told her she would be allowed to work with data straight from the Orb. Everyone on Earth knew about the device but so few people had access to it, even peripherally. The temptation became very real. At school, they were allowed to use the 'educational' section put out by the Protectors and that was enough to pique her interest.

Full access to the Orb would've made her commit her first born and both kidneys to any project they wanted. The ability to develop and study that thing made her sign up and thus began a career she never dreamed possible. While Cassie had the mental fortitude and drive for technology, she wasn't the most physically imposing figure and the AIA had to change that.

Their training program took the better part of a year and taught her a variety of skills she never considered necessary for her future. Unarmed combat, firearms, flying and insurgency all came with the package. Even after she finished the initial education, she had classes for the next two years and practice runs every week.

After three years, they made sure she kept up with her physical routine and that she practiced the others rigorously. It meant her days basically started with exercise, moved into technology advancements and study then more physical practice, a little more work and a few hours off at night.

By the time she hit thirty, she considered herself to be quite dangerous and certainly ready for whatever terrifying threat the AIA needed her to be prepared for. Considering the harmony on the planet, she didn't know what they expected. Separatist movements rose and fell occasionally but they were put down by the military long before anyone else needed to worry.

When she got the call telling her to hop a shuttle to Gamma Alpha immediately and to wear the dress uniform, she thought she was being called in for a training exercise. On the way there, she learned about the attack through a standard briefing then watched a news video about the battle in orbit.

The Gnosis performed admirably as did the other technology coming

off of it. Brilliant.
The various media outlets were hailing the Gnosis crew as heroes though they didn't mention the attack on Gamma Alpha. AIA officials covered that part up but Cassie had the combat statistics from the soldiers who used the power armor. The data showed they took direct hits from beam weapons and the operators survived.
We knew the armor would make it but concussion was hard to judge. Looking at these figures, it appears they didn't even get injured. Fantastic.
Their battle caused extensive damage to one of the hallways leading to the Orb but at least that would be easy to fix.
I assume I'm here to determine why the aliens came after the Orb but the why is less obvious. Did they want to destroy it? Stealing it would've required more tools and equipment, more people. It's not exactly small. And there's no way they could've downloaded every bit of information in the thing. There's far too much.
The wonders of the Orb had yet to be fully exhausted so she admitted there was a good chance the aliens might have a way to scan through the thing in a more efficient manner than the interfaces setup by humanity. The fact they were dealing with a culture or species with knowledge of the device worried her more than the notion they were not alone in the universe.
The media will be playing up the angle of first contact for sure. They don't know how scary this really is. Not yet.
Cassie's com went off and she tapped it to answer without looking to see who it was. "Yes?"
"Miss Alexander," Jordan Bell spoke into the com, using the honorific Cassie disliked most. Would Ms kill him? He acted as the director of her division, not her direct lead but two above her in the rank ladder. "I hope you're en route to the facility already."
"I am," Cassie replied. "What can I do for you?"
"You'll be meeting with Captain Desmond Bradford of the Gnosis and his chief science officer Lieutenant Salina Gold. I've done some digging on both of them and can send you their dossiers if you'd like."
"Go ahead."

“Take a look before you land. The AIA is lending you out to the military for the duration of this operation.”
Cassie’s eyes widened. “Whoa, what does that mean exactly? What do you mean lending out? Am I a library book now?”
“You’re one of the foremost experts not only on the Orb itself but much of the technology aboard their ship,” Jordan said. “You’re skills and talents are needed there. Furthermore, we need a representative in this situation and you’re well trained and ready for such an assignment. I expect you are ready for some time off planet.”
“With all due respect, I am not,” Cassie replied. It took some effort to keep her voice even. “I was led to believe this was an advise and observe mission, not a full change of venue.”
“Most of our assignments carry need to know points.” Jordan smiled. “And you just now needed to know.”
“I don’t think it’s funny.”
“Just trying to soften the blow, Agent.” Jordan sighed. “You’ll have a chance to square your affairs at home before departing with the ship but I suspect you’ll be heading out in the next few days. Good luck and let Andrea know if you have any other questions. She can make arrangements to have your things packed and your flat secured. Jordan out.”
Cassie stared at her screen as the news occupied it again, numbers and letters flashing by unheeded. Jordan’s news couldn’t have surprised her more if he would’ve told her she’d be sent to mop the floors in an Amsterdam brothel. She didn’t know if fear gripped her stomach or excitement. Despite the safety of a desk job, she did yearn to see something else.
Getting a chance to see the technology at work outside the simulations appealed to her. She took a deep breath to dispel the nerves working her over. Showing herself as jittery to a military commander wouldn’t go over very well, especially if she was supposed to be taken seriously once they began working together.
The shuttle set down and she steadied herself one more time before disembarking. Military personnel rushed about the area, weapons at the ready. People to her left policed bodies and it made her stand up

straighter. She'd seen dead bodies but never in a battlefield before, never recently killed.

What happened here? How did these aliens cause so much damage?

A young man in uniform approached. His shaved blond hair had been growing for maybe a week and his blue eyes made him look terribly young. He offered a salute but didn't look very certain. "Um … Miss Alexander?"

What is it with the Miss stuff? Cassie ignored the faux pas and smiled instead. "Yes. This is crazy."

"Yes, ma'am. They came from nowhere, hitting us hard. My name's Lieutenant Simon Walker. Please come with me." He stepped away from the platform and down the stairs. Cassie followed, really cursing the heels as they nearly got stuck in the grating of each step. "Are you here to help us analyze the attack data?"

"Um … something like that," Cassie replied. "I'm not entirely sure what I'm supposed to talk about yet. You understand."

"Yes, of course."

"Is it safe here?"

"Sentinel troops from the Gnosis came down and helped secure the area," Simon replied. "I have to say, we didn't know how they'd perform in that power armor. We heard rumors, sure, but seeing it in action? They came down here like angels of death er … I don't mean to sound like I'm using hyperbole, ma'am. But seriously, it was impressive."

"I'm sure it was." Cassie had seen videos of training simulations for the armor. They impressed her then and seeing the carnage, just imagining what they faced, improved her confidence in their technology. Practical application beats theory every day. "Where were you during the conflict?"

Simon gestured to one of the gun emplacements. "My crew manned that weapon. We were one of the lucky ones because the other turret was taken out by a high yield explosive. Melted the metal completely." He bowed his head for a moment. "We lost four people to that."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Cassie sighed. Thinking about the deaths

dampened her excitement about the situation. Knowing their equipment worked didn't matter nearly as much as the lives they lost. Painful as it was, if they broke into a full-on war, many people would die. One of the best things to come from discovering the Orb was relative peace.

And instead of killing each other, something else has to show up and cause trouble.

They went up the stairs to the front of the facility and through the double doors usually meant for heavy equipment. The personnel doors seemed to be sealed off and guards protected each one. Cassie passed by two men in power armor who saluted Simon. They must've been from the Gnosis.

We'll have to outfit the standard guards here with this stuff now that it's been proven to work so efficiently. Early tests of the armor had some of the researchers convinced it might explode. The power cores on the devices were shielded but potentially unstable. They put them on meat covered dummies at first and moved them remotely, testing what they might do to a human body.

The first units did explode but they corrected the problem and continued trials. Eventually, the fourth-generation units were considered safe enough for humans to try out. After six months, the production version went live and those were the ones that boarded the Gnosis.

Simon escorted her down a bland, metal hallway and to a conference room located near the Orb control room. She'd been there plenty of times to observe and work with the peripheral interface but the device itself was kept much deeper into the facility. Somewhere down there, a fight broke out and the creatures trying to break in were killed.

I wonder who I'm meeting now.

The door opened and several people turned to look at her. She recognized them from dossiers. The older uniformed gentlemen at the head of the table was Admiral Reach, in charge of military operations and the Gnosis project. To his left, Captain Bradford was seated and across from him, Lieutenant Salina Gold, a scientist, sat with perfect posture.

The lead researcher, Doctor Lisa Harper, stood near the window, pacing nervously. Simon stepped back as Cassie entered and the door closed, leaving her alone with the others. She put on a smile and approached. “Hello, I’m Agent Cassandra Alexander of the AIA. I’ve been asked to attend this briefing and assist.”

“We know,” Admiral Reach replied. “I assume you know everyone in the room already since you spooks have files on the world, right?”

Cassie’s cheeks flushed but she nodded. “Yes, I’m familiar with all your records and names.”

“Good, then please have a seat and we’ll get right down to business. We’re dealing with an alien threat who came straight for the Orb. This concerns the entire world, especially since none of us here are naive enough to believe they won’t be back for another shot later. My people are combing through the different bits of alien tech and we have a prisoner to interrogate.”

“Sounds positive,” Cassie said. “Has the … er … creature said anything? What’s it look like?”

Doctor Harper tapped her tablet, bringing an image on a wall screen before answering. “We’ve performed a medical analysis and found him to be surprisingly similar to human beings. Same parts, same nourishment requirements and coloration. Some of their faculties seem to have developed differently but not significantly enough to matter.”

“Such as?” Captain Bradford asked.

“They see better than us but their sense of smell is diminished.” Doctor Harper shrugged. “Their tactile senses are also enhanced, perhaps to a hyper level where they might be able to feel vibrations and know what is causing it half a mile away. However, beyond those points, they are pretty much human beings.”

“How does this even happen?” Admiral Reach asked. “What are the odds of such a similar species developing far from Earth?”

“Long before the Orb was discovered, we theorized about precursor races which may have seeded several planets. It didn’t explain human evolution, however, which is a generally agreed upon point. Perhaps they influenced us all in subtle some way, nudging the development

process, but we have no definitive proof of such a thing."
Doctor Harper continued, "in any event, our Orb is unlikely to be the only such device in the galaxy. Perhaps they put one on several habitable planets, waiting for the sentient races of those places to discover them. I'm speculating, of course. Wildly in fact."
"Of course," Admiral Reach muttered.
The implications of what Harper suggested made Cassie frown. She turned to the screen displaying the physiology of the enemy. The image could've been anyone she ever met. "So this is first contact. A species nearly indistinguishable from our own with different but not insurmountable technology. May I ask what the military proposes we do about it?"
Admiral Reach scowled. "These aliens have declared war on the human race. My inclination is to finish what they started. Determine where they came from, what they want and end their ability to make war."
Doctor Harper cleared her throat. "I'm not sure hostility is our best option, Admiral."
"They wouldn't even answer our hails," Captain Bradford said. "They came with the express intent of gaining access to the Orb and they planned on killing or destroying whatever got in their way. Something tells me that peace isn't exactly an option and believe me, I'd much rather pursue that than the alternative."
Lieutenant Gold held up her hand before speaking. "I believe we need to determine why they want the Orb. Depending on the answer to the question, we may know whether or not war is even necessary. For example, there's a possibility that this attack was one of desperation, something to save themselves from some kind of destruction."
"Meaning," Admiral Reach said, "that they might've brought everything they had for the effort."
"Nothing's impossible," Lieutenant Gold replied. "I wouldn't rule it out. Likewise, just because this particular faction did not feel like playing nice doesn't mean they represent their entire species. We may find there are more amiable individuals within their ranks. Diplomacy may still be an option."

Captain Bradford looked at Cassie. “What’s the AIA assessment of this situation?”

“We’re reserving any official opinion until the interrogation with the prisoner has been concluded.” Cassie tried not to look like a deer caught in headlights. The question caught her off guard. “Has he been spoken to yet?”

Admiral Reach shook his head. “No, we performed the medical exam through his cell door and he has been in restraints since we took him prisoner. He hasn’t uttered a sound as of yet and technicians are accessing the Orb for translation services. Assuming this thing can speak at all.”

Doctor Harper glared at the Admiral. “I think we’ve established the prisoner as male. You can at least give the prisoner some dignity.”

Captain Bradford hummed. “I’m pretty sure he or it doesn’t care what we call it. Our notions of decency might be totally lost to these people. The best we can hope for is an explanation for what we’re dealing with and why.”

“I’d like to be in on the conversation,” Cassie said. Her heart beat a little faster as she spoke, fear tickling her stomach. “I’m certain I can get something out of it … er … him. Would that be okay?”

“AIA has jurisdiction,” Admiral Reach said. “At this point at least. When we determine whether or not we’re dealing with a total monster or a bunch of potential war criminals … well, the military can take over from there.”

“Understood.” Cassie nodded, gesturing for the door. “Shall we start now? Something tells me we would like to get this underway as quickly as possible, especially if we’re worried about a second attack.”

“Indeed.” Captain Bradford stood. “All things considered, the quicker he talks, the sooner we can plan our next move. Lead the way, Doctor Harper. I think we’d all like to see what this person has to say and whether or not we have to worry about a full-scale war breaking out between our people … and aliens from beyond our solar system.”

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Chapter 3

Desmond had only met a few members of the AIA in his time. They tended to be much older than Cassie and not half as attractive. He found their choice of representatives surprising. They always seemed stuffy to him but even in her fancy white uniform, he sensed a defiant soul beneath. Someone that didn't necessarily adhere to the typical restrictions of her organization.

Perhaps they recognized that the situation they were in called for someone who thought outside the regimented box of rules and regulations. He was making assumptions, of course, and he knew judging the book by the cover never turned out well. How strict would she be about toeing the line?

I guess I'll find out soon enough.

They all went down to the security center where their holding cells were kept. The prisoner had been in one of the interrogation rooms for hours, enduring observation and hands-off medical examinations. No one had spoken with him yet but the guards stated he didn't respond when they handled him roughly.

Stepping up to the security glass, they peered in at their prisoner and the tension in the area rose noticeably. If the man sitting in that room were not wearing a uniform and had been identified as an alien, he would never have known the truth. Brown hair, pale skin, regular eyes … he could've been one of the Gnosis crew members.

"And we're sure he's not human?" Desmond asked. "That these people aren't some kind of separatist faction that just spent time away from the planet long enough to build up the appearance of an alien invasion?"

"As I said," Doctor Harper replied, "they may appear to be the same but there are differences. While we were unable to perform any invasive checks on this one, we did perform an autopsy on one of the dead ones … one which was mostly whole. This allowed us to confirm, without a shadow of a doubt, that they are not human."

Desmond nodded, thinking of the ramifications of the enemy's

appearance. They could've been patient, infiltrated the planet and made their way here without the attack. Perhaps they felt a sense of urgency to get it done quickly. Maybe they were incapable of speech. Regardless, he dreaded the idea of a situation involving spies.
Admiral Reach drew a deep breath. "I was informed by command that my interrogator was to give the AIA representative first crack at the prisoner." He turned to Cassie. "Are you prepared?"
Desmond watched her closely and noted only a brief hesitation before she nodded. "I am."
"Are you armed?" Reach asked.
"No, sir. I only have my computer with me right now which I can use as a translation device." Cassie tapped the screen on the tablet. "Hopefully, we'll be able to find a common method of communicating."
"Very well. Go ahead. The guard will be with you with orders to react should anything strange happen."
"Understood." Cassie moved over to the door and nodded at the armed man waiting for her. He opened it up and they stepped inside.
The alien didn't look up but Desmond detected a little tension increase in his face. Perhaps he was prepared to be hurt. The thought didn't bode well when considering what their culture might do to prisoners.
Desmond leaned close to Salina and whispered, "What's your take on all this? You've been pretty quiet."
"Considering what we're seeing with these aliens, I understand everyone's concerns. However, I'm worried about what this one might say if we can talk to him. Surrendering to the enemy is one thing but to creatures you know little about?" Salina shook her head. "He would have no idea what we might do to him or how badly this could go."
Desmond thought about the motivations of the alien. Survival might be too obvious but then again, reading too far into the situation might be just as dangerous. Either way, he bit his tongue and decided to simply watch the attempted interrogation. Could the young AIA officer get through to him?
Cassie put her tablet on the table, sat down and tapped a button. A beam of light shot from a sensor and ran over the alien's head. He

flinched but didn't move. When it finished, she cleared her throat and began. "Hello. My name is Cassandra and I'd very much like to talk to you. This device has scanned you and will attempt to translate my words to your language."

A few moments passed before the device began to speak in what sounded like total gibberish. The syllables represented Japanese but none of it seemed familiar to Desmond. He looked at Salina who shrugged. It took a bit longer to repeat than when Cassie spoke it the first time but when it finished, she continued.

"You can speak plainly and the device will repeat your words in my language."

Again, the speaker pumped out more strange words. The alien looked up at her and smirked.

"We've studied your people and have a vague understanding of your … language." The translation device took a moment to translate the odd grunts and quick syllables. Having the words come out in a computerized monotone made them seem eerie and all the more alien.

"Speak."

"I see," Cassie said. "Would you mind telling me your name then?"

"Revik," he replied.

"Why did you attack our planet, Revik?" Cassie asked. "What did you hope to accomplish? Were you after the Orb?"

"What you call the Orb, we refer to as Trindisha. They are powerful artifacts."

"Artifacts …" Cassie's eyes narrowed. "So you believe there are more of them. Does one exist on your planet as well?"

"Yes …" Revik chewed his lip. "There are many. They belonged to a race called the Trind. Have you not discovered this on your own? The histories should be present in every Trindisha."

"We haven't uncovered any histories," Cassie replied. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"If you are able to talk to me then my unit is dead and the attack vessels are all gone. I am alone here with no hope of rescue. They tasked us all to die before speaking but I could not obey." Revik looked away. "I dishonor everything about myself, my people and my

family but I … I do not want to die."
"Coward then," Admiral Reach said. "Lucky for us, we got one that's so afraid of pain."
Desmond didn't buy it entirely. Perhaps the alien was scared and didn't want to be tortured but he didn't hold out at all. Did his race truly lack any discipline? He spoke of honor so they must've had some kind of code. Surrendering to avoid death seemed understandable but immediately talking? It felt like he might be offering up some misinformation.
"Do you think he's lying?" Desmond asked.
Doctor Harper checked her computer. "If he is, then the telltale signs of dishonesty don't apply to him."
"Tell me more about your people," Cassie asked. "What do you call yourselves?"
"We are Pahxin from well beyond your galaxy. Millions of light years away."
"Can you give us coordinates?" Cassie leaned forward and moved the tablet toward him. She tapped it a couple times and Desmond strained to see. She showed him star maps. "Where is your home in relation to ours?"
Very good. We can plan an assault that way if necessary.
"I …" Revik leaned to look at the screen. "You see … it would be …" He lifted his hand and let out a horrifying scream. Cassie very nearly fell out of her chair as she scrambled away from him. His hands slapped his forehead as the guard raised his weapon and aimed it at him. Doctor Harper opened the door and rushed in.
"Don't shoot!" She cried. "Something's happening in his head!"
Salina joined her, using her own scanner before backing away. She glanced back at Desmond and shook her head. He frowned, motioning for her to come back. Before the science officer made it to the door, blood began flowing freely from Revik's nose and he began twitching violently.
Doctor Harper pressed a device to the side of his head and tapped a button several times but nothing seemed to happen. A moment later, the screaming stopped and Revik slumped in his seat unmoving.

Salina moved over and whispered in Desmond's ear, letting him know Revik must've died.
"How?" Desmond asked.
"Some kind of brain hemorrhage." Salina looked at her tablet. "It came on suddenly when he reached out for the device."
"A trigger?" Admiral Reach asked. "Some kind of method to protect their home in the event of capture."
"Seems like it." Desmond rubbed his forehead and stepped into the cell. He joined Cassie and touched her shoulder, making her jump. "Are you okay?"
Cassie nodded quickly, composing herself. She reached for her tablet but stopped. Blood splattered the surface, small drops and a larger glob near the bottom. Desmond picked it up and wiped it clean with his sleeve before offering it to her. She didn't seem like she wanted to take it but did anyway, swallowing hard.
"He's dead," Doctor Harper announced. "So sudden!"
"When he tried to tell me where he was from," Cassie said. "They must've conditioned these people. I bet there were other topics that could've done the same thing. Far more effective than trusting them to kill themselves, they simply have to be killed by their interrogators. That … was devilishly clever … and horrifying."
"We understand a lot though," Desmond said. "Real revelations. There are more Orbs out there and aliens as well."
"And people who will kill for them," Admiral Reach added. "But as much as these things are intriguing, we don't know what to do next."
"Their computers." Cassie looked at Admiral Reach. "I need access to their devices. Any that are intact. I should be able to gather data from them and perhaps figure out where they were going next … or something like that. They seemed to be trying to collect more Orbs. We need to figure out why."
"I don't care about why," Admiral Reach said. "I just want to know where they are so we can kill them."
Doctor Harper scowled at him. "Motivations are necessary to start a war, don't you think?"
Admiral Reach looked her in the eyes, ticking off points. "They

attacked our fleet, assaulted your facility and killed our people. Do you think the dead soldiers and researchers care much about what motivated them to do so? And do you believe the human race wants to find a peaceful solution with our attackers?"

"Has the human race been informed of exactly what happened?" Harper asked. Desmond exchanged a knowing look with Salina. The media outlets discussed the orbital conflict. They didn't say anything about the assault on Gamma Alpha, not yet. Now that they knew why they were attacked, but it would likely come up.

The truth might unify people behind a serious war effort, even if it took humanity well beyond their solar system. Never mind the fact they would need to build additional ships to wage any real campaign and the training to go with them. If Admiral Reach wasn't nervous about the prospect of combat, he should've been.

Earth had the resources and utilized new technology every month. At least they'd be ready quickly providing the enemy didn't come in greater numbers before they could prepare. The possibility made Desmond twitchy. While Revik made it sound like they were only there for an orb, they very well could've been an expeditionary force, paving the way for an invasion.

"We'll handle the PR part of this, Doctor," Admiral Reach said. "You worry about the research part. Help that young lady with her investigation into the technology and report back to us as soon as possible. In fact, how long do you feel you'll need before you can tell us something?"

"It depends on what it takes for us to decrypt it," Harper said. "At least a day. Possibly two."

"Alright, as long as we have something soon." Admiral Reach turned away and started down the hall. "We don't have much more time as I'm sure you're well aware. Captain Bradford, please join me in the conference room. We've got a few things to discuss before you go back to your regular duties."

"Yes, sir." Desmond nodded. He turned to Salina. "Stick around and see if you can help out at all. It's a rare opportunity to work with the Orb, right?"

“Of course, sir. Thank you.” Salina smiled, which was a rare expression for the serious woman. “I’ll see you later then.”
“Good luck.” Desmond turned and hurried after the Admiral. I hope we don’t need it.

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Cassie had never seen someone die in her presence. The horror on the man’s face combined with his screaming shocked her but she couldn’t let it get to her. Still, even years of training didn’t prepare her for what she experienced in the interrogation room. It had been going so well before the incident. In the back of her mind, she knew something wasn’t right.
He shouldn’t have been so quick to tell me what he did. Maybe he also realized we’d get a lot of the data from their computer devices. However, now that we know their people are sabotaged, we have to be careful with the gear too. If they had no qualms about sacrificing a life, they’d likely do the same to a computer.
Harper brought her to one of the analytics rooms where they’d be able to observe and study the various devices confiscated from the bodies. Lieutenant Salina Gold accompanied them which made some sense. As the head science officer aboard the Gnosis, she would have the best chance of helping them from the military side of the house. Admiral Reach would definitely appreciate her involvement.
Computer banks lined the walls with several terminals for people to interface with. Three tables occupied the center of the room, their smooth metal surfaces littered with the bits of alien technology they were able to salvage. Some seemed intact while others were trashed from the skirmish.
Armor sat on one of the tables, light weight and only covering the torso. It struck Cassie as odd until she noticed the box on the front which had lenses on the sides. A quick scan indicated they produced a personal shield capable of taking several direct shots and probably an unlimited number of grazes.
“What do you think?” Cassie asked. “Do they power these with some

kind of battery or something else entirely?"
Salina stepped forward. "It would make sense if they did a renewable energy source, something allowing them to recycle the power continuously. Otherwise, they would burn out long before they finished a fight."
Doctor Harper sat at one of the terminals and began typing. "I've captured the video data we have from the conflict. The shields were able to take our normal small-arms fire and shrug off the damage but they didn't have such an easy time with the power armor weapons. Those packed a much harder punch and tore through the defenses quite easily."
"That's to be expected," Cassie said. "They were only prepared for our standard defenses. Note that they waited to attack until the Gnosis was on its maiden voyage, far enough from Earth to give them a chance. If our fleet hadn't been able to hold them off … If your people hadn't been so amazing, then this situation may not have ended favorably."
Salina tapped the table. "Before we do any further analysis, may I suggest we isolate the items we're interested in to ensure they don't self-destruct like the prisoner did? If these short out or worse, explode, the damage could be substantially worse than what happened in the interrogation room."
"My thoughts exactly," Cassie said. "Can you initiate the containment fields on the tables, Doctor?"
"I'm on it now." Harper tapped a few keys and a blue, transparent dome burst over each table. The energy hummed and crackled as it stabilized. "Let's start with some surface scans to determine if there are any incendiary devices that might be dangerous."
"Will you be able to disarm them?" Salina asked.
Cassie hummed. "It depends on how they armed the devices I suppose. The good news is the containment field is powerful enough to handle some pretty serious detonations. Right, Doctor?"
Harper chuckled. "You don't sound entirely sure, Cassie. But yes, we've tested it extensively and I can say with certainty we can handle whatever they might put against us. I've also isolated each individual

item within their own field so that if one goes, it won't take them all. The energy field provides the scanning so we're ready to begin."
Cassie nodded. "I'll take the computers if you don't mind."
"I'm on the armor," Harper replied. "Lieutenant Gold, you're on the weapons. Report back in ten minutes."
Cassie wirelessly connected her own device to the terminal, gaining access to the dozens of applications she'd specifically updated with what she learned from studying the Orb's coding structure. As these creatures likely built their technology with their own version, she hoped it might grant her an advantage in cracking it.
The initial scans showed no incendiary devices nor any obvious form of sabotage. The next step, a tentative probe, didn't reveal anything. Cassie needed to power it up for any further testing and it seemed possible to do so remotely. Her hand started to sweat just a moment before she hit the button which would initiate the startup sequence. The alien computer clicked on, the screen lighting up green for a moment before displaying a high resolution image of a diamond shape. It took less than five seconds to boot up and she initiated a translation app. Her heart skipped a beat when the message came back that there was a code match.
It's not exact but I'll be able to extrapolate from here. Once I get a few more similarities, we can build a codex and teach the application how to talk to this thing. Then we'll get to the heart of their data and whether or not they stored anything useful on these devices.
Once the device came online, it sent out a burst of data. A quick scan showed it was attempting to wirelessly connect with something in orbit as well as the other computers on the table. The individual forcefields kept the signal local but she noted the activity. She'd want to turn off the signal as soon as she took control.
Patience was the name of the game and Cassie had to take a couple deep breaths to avoid tapping her foot. The others around her worked with severe intensity, staring at their screens as if they might will the computers to work faster. They had time to get their work done so Cassie forced herself to relax, letting her shoulders slump and the muscles in her back loosen.

The root directory of the device came online but Cassie didn't simply want to navigate through their interface. She wanted direct access to the database beneath. That would allow her to run her own queries and gather the data much faster. If the alien's method of storing data was roughly the same as humanity's, she'd have several ready-made scripts for the task.

"We're at the ten minute mark," Doctor Harper said. "Do you have anything to report?"

Salina started, "The weapons are not sabotaged. I suspect any sort of device they would've installed may have been too unstable to ensure it would not go off during an inopportune combat moment. They carried two types of firearm, energy and something else. The former I'm still analyzing, including the power cores, and the latter … I haven't figured out."

"What do you mean?" Harper asked. "What's so odd about them?"

"They appear to have exhausted all the ammunition in them. I'm not getting any energy readings though they are, at the very least, electric. I suspect they fire projectiles and they simply exhausted them all but I have to reverse engineer them, at least through simulation, to know for sure. I'll have another update in an hour or so."

"Perfect." Harper paused a moment before asking, "how're the computers coming?"

Cassie gave her a quick update on where she was at. She turned in her chair. "My applications are on it but they'll need some time. I don't know if an hour will cut it but I think that's a fair regroup time. Where are you at, Doctor?"

Harper took a deep breath before answering. "Well … these folks used power in a very efficient manner. Before today, I would've said we were incredible when it came to how we managed energy. These personal shields are a great example of how we practically had no idea what we were doing."

"What do you mean?" Salina said. "How do they work?"

"They attach them to the armor, which has a network of power lines all throughout the plates. These connect up at the shield itself, which allows the shield to emit from the four lenses. What we failed to

notice was there were receivers on the back to relay the power and ensure consistent defense all around the body.
“However, there are two weak points: the head and the lower legs. The chest and back are heavily protected and could take the most punishment. The shield itself does not get covered but it is the thickest part of the armor. My analysis shows it could take at least two to three direct hits … and it’s a pretty small target anyway.”
Cassie frowned. “Incredible technology. How’s the power efficiency so great?”
“An initial charge turns the unit on,” Harper replied. “The body itself acts as a generator of sorts. When they are breathing, they’re generating more power. The material surrounding the armor is also porous and tiny follicles are able to collect ambient radiation. An inhale-exhale motion moves the energy and keeps the shields working.”
Salina asked, “So if someone held their breath the process would stop?”
“No, a standard charge would last for fifteen minutes without any motion at all.” Harper shrugged. “Indefinitely, if the person breathes normally.”
“What else do you have to figure out?” Cassie joked. “You seem to have got the whole thing down.”
“I still don’t know what material they used for any of this,” Harper replied. “Nor have I been able to break down what they used for the projector lenses. I have only hit our local database. I’ll have to hit the Orb to get more data on that part I think. And the power relays … We wouldn’t have done it this way so I’ve got some study to do there, too.”
“What about the ships?” Salina asked. “Surely, we must have the debris coming back soon. How’s the salvage operation going?”
“Slowly,” Harper said. “Only one of the enemy vessels remained remotely intact but that isn’t saying much. The initial assessment shows even that ship lost the power core when it exploded. We might get something from individual systems but the crews are calling their find a total loss. Still, they’re bringing back what they’ve got. I expect

them by tomorrow morning."
Cassie's computer beeped and pulled her attention back to the screen. "I'm back on," she said. "We'll talk again in an hour. Hey … can we have someone bring us some water or something? If we're going to live down here, I'm parched."
Harper nodded. "I'm on it."
The code matching software found all similarities and began to create a translation for those parts it didn't understand. Cassie tapped into the Orb to give her program a larger dictionary to work from. The work looked like it wouldn't take too long. Despite the events that brought about this situation, she couldn't help but be excited.
This find proved so many theories she and her colleagues discussed back at the AIA. They knew aliens existed elsewhere in the galaxy, at least at some point in history. The Orb itself, with its ordered data structure and vast storage archives, proved some kind of intelligent creature built it.
The debates ranged from precursor spacefaring cultures to gods. One of her older colleagues presented a paper on how the Greeks may have had access to the Orb and used that assumption to explain away their old pantheon. Even after years of study, humanity only scratched the surface of what the ancient device could do.
However, Cassie found it hard to believe a Greek named Zeus discovered the Orb and learned how to shape shift, throw lightning bolts and guide the future of mankind. If they accepted such a thing, then all historical fictions had to come into question. Was there truly a hero like Beowulf who fought a great monster or was that a nonfiction account of the Orb meddling in human affairs?
The theories sounded romantic but Cassie had to dismiss them. She founded her opinions on logic and possibility. Considering how they had to access the Orb, how they needed computer interfaces to interpret the data, she couldn't imagine early man working with it at all other than to perhaps worship it.
Of course, if the theory about a culture meddling in the development of planets across the galaxy turned out to be true, then perhaps it was possible for early man to access it. Atlantis came up several times in

debate. An ancient nation capable of wonders. If they discovered a method to interface the device, then maybe all the rumors about them were true.
But why did they vanish? And how had humanity never uncovered their splendors?
Cassie didn't like going down the path to answer those questions, not earnestly. The answers generally were apocalyptic in nature and too frightening to indulge. Much as she liked to take things to logical conclusions, this was one time she didn't feel it necessary. Especially when she was about to pop the directory structure on the computer. Focus your mind on the here and now. It's safer … and a lot less depressing.

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Desmond sat through a briefing with Admiral Reach concerning the next steps. The situation took only a few minutes because they didn't have a lot to go on. They needed to wait for the findings of their research team to give some clear direction for a path forward. In the meantime, the Gnosis was to repair and prepare for … something.
"You have operational authority over the research and planning," Reach said. "I'm sure you understand how curious your crew is right now so decide how much you intend to tell them. Considering how huge this situation is, I have a feeling they'll want something more than vague notions. Having a front row seat to an alien invasion will have an impact on those who were there."
"I thought about it," Desmond said. "I'll work with our section chiefs and ensure we have this under control."
"Good." Reach stood. "I have to report to high command and let them know what's going on. When you have information, interrupt whatever I'm doing. My aide will know to do so. The council isn't going to be thrilled at how little info I have right now so anything I can throw their way will help me out."
"Understood." Desmond got up as well. "Good luck, sir."
"Thank you, Captain. To you as well."

After Reach left, Desmond contacted Vincent. The commander answered by shouting over quite a ruckus behind him. “Commander Bowman here!”
“What’s going on up there, Vincent?” Desmond asked. “What’s all the noise?”
“I’m down in engineering! Give me a moment.” The loud noise became quieter. “I’ve stepped out of the room. During repairs of the minor systems, they discovered a vulnerability and are taking steps to make it safer. Apparently, one of the generators wasn’t very well protected and if it would’ve exploded, people could’ve gotten hurt.”
“I’m glad they caught it.” Desmond hummed, wondering what other issues they needed to address. “We have research teams studying the various tech and bodies of the aliens. Admiral Reach put me in charge so I’m going to run operations from the office here. Are you okay to continue command in my absence?”
“Yes, sir. I’m just lending a hand where I can right now and checking in on everyone.”
“Good. I’ll keep you informed of what’s going on as it comes up. For now, ensure we’re ready for another long voyage. How’s the pilot who got shot down?”
“A few bumps and bruises only. The medics have already released him to quarters for some bed rest.” Vincent paused a moment, muttering to a person on the other end of the com. “Sorry about that. He’ll be ready for our next engagement in a day or two.”
“Perfect. Check in with the rest of the fleet as well and see where they’re at. I’m assuming they’ve got search and rescue still out there. I want a full report on all the people we’ve found and … and the ones we’ve lost too.” Desmond sat back down. “Then get me a defensive analysis. How ready are we for another attack?”
“I’m on it, sir.”
“Thank you. I’ll catch up with you later. Desmond out.” The captain turned to his computer and stared at the screen, thoughtful for several long minutes. He didn’t have a specific direction to take at the moment but needed to allow people to get their jobs done without him badgering them for results.

Casualty reports came in both from the Gnosis and the rest of the fleet. His stomach felt heavy as he went through the long list of names from those who were lost in the initial attack. They fought valiantly to hold the enemy off long enough to get the support they needed. They may have been able to defeat the attack but what would the cost have been?

Desmond knew the man who had to deliver the tragic news to the parents of the fallen for the other ships in the fleet. He didn't envy him the task and quietly thanked God he didn't have to do the same. The relief would be short lived if they truly went to war and a peaceful resolution seemed beyond unlikely.

If the enemy came with a mere expeditionary force, they may have only sent lighter vessels too. Larger capital ships held the potential to be truly devastating. With the Gnosis as the most advanced ship, they really needed additional versions to hold back a real tide of any appreciable magnitude.

How fast can we build more ships? I know they were taking their time with a more combat focused version of the Gnosis. That project has been fast tracked, I guarantee it. Will this be like America in World War Two? Will they dedicate every factory and available-to-hand to bolster our military?

Once they released some version of the truth to the public about the attack, they'd have the necessary support to do so. Fear and patriotism would drive people to support an effort to defend the entire race against whatever lurked out there beyond the borders of the solar system. Prior to the attack, they had planned to discover wonders. Unfortunately, wonders came looking for them and they didn't want to play nice.

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Chapter 4

Four Days Later

Cassie never slept at Gamma Alpha before and was surprised the quarters were so comfortable. The first day they dove into studying the various alien pieces of equipment saw her working well into the night. Despite the fact she found so many similarities in the code, the information itself proved to be encrypted and worse, requiring translation.

All the next day and most of the night, she applied dozens of ciphers and even created several new ones. Sleeping proved difficult with the frustration despite exhaustion clinging to her. On the third day, others tried to offer some advice but she'd gone down such an advanced track, they didn't have anything new to offer.

However, after more coffee than she cared to admit and a walk outside, she made a breakthrough. One of her ciphers, possibly the most basic of them, worked. Combined with the translation software from the Orb, the epiphany allowed her to break through their encryption. When her application finished running, she had full access to the data stored on the device.

No one was around to share the triumph but she clapped anyway. Punch drunk from all the caffeine and too little sleep, she backed the data up to a separate hard drive and started running her queries. The Orb translated the words on the fly, giving her a remarkably legible set of text files.

The videos would require more time to decode but they had plenty of them. Based on the directory structure and what the Orb converted the text to say, she guessed they might be video journals of whoever carried the device. They might be insightful into the purpose of the attack. When she found their orders, she knew she had hit the jackpot.

After four days of working on it, Cassie had to present her findings in the evening after dinner. Someone brought her stuff from her apartment so she didn't have to wear the stupid uniform anymore,

opting instead for a pair of comfortable slacks and a blouse. When she showed up to the conference room, the audience was somewhat smaller than she anticipated.

Captain Bradford, Admiral Reach, Doctor Harper and Lieutenant Gold were all present. A scribe sat at the back of the room, a young technician with a tablet ready to take notes. She closed the door behind her and took a seat quietly, waiting for the meeting to begin. Everyone was staring at their computers until the Admiral spoke up.

"Alright, we've come together for a discovery meeting. What've you learned and how much more time do you need?"

Doctor Harper started, "We've performed investigations into the equipment of the aliens and their bodies. At the physiological level, they are no different than we are and by that I mean they can't take any more punishment. They're sturdy creatures, capable of adapting to several environments. Our atmosphere would not have been harmful to them however …

"They were not prepared for some of the germs we've developed here. As I did my investigation it was pretty clear that they'd suffer from some of our more advanced illnesses. The healthiest of them might've lived through such a thing but one in poor shape would have had a problem."

"So they could die from a cold?" Desmond asked. "Like in War of the Worlds?"

"It's a distinct possibility," Harper said, "however, I can tell you we did find an as of yet unidentified substance in their bodies. Our chemists don't know what it's for. I'm guessing they have developed a universal inoculation though. It would make sense for a space faring people who had been exploring for a while."

"I trust you are borrowing this idea?" Admiral Reach asked.

"We're attempting to figure out how they anticipated what the body needed," Harper replied. "They may simply be boosting the immune system but with all of them dead, it's harder to tell. Couple that with the fact the substance we discovered is made up of ingredients we've never seen. We'll get it soon, however."

"Good work." Admiral Reach turned to his tablet. "Anything else on

that front?"
"The more technical data has been sent to all of your accounts," Harper said. "You can find their autopsy reports and physical details there. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask me."
"Lieutenant Gold." Admiral Reach gestured to the science officer. "What're you presenting?"
"Weapons and armor, sir." Lieutenant Gold stood up and moved over to the large TV. She brought up a number of videos and let them play in the four different corners. "Doctor Harper helped with the initial plunge into their defenses but I took over the next morning. We were able to actually use some of their equipment and tested it all."
One of the videos showed a fully armored soldier taking a shot with one of the alien pistols in the firing range. The beam cut through the target, incinerating it. Another depicted their armor, fully repaired, taking several projectile shots and coming out unscathed. She also showed off their personal shields and how they reacted with their own weapons.
"As you can see, their own beam weapons cannot pierce their personal shields. Ours are on a different frequency and are therefore able to penetrate their defenses. I'm of the impression they had enough foresight to pump up their offensive and defensive capabilities but they didn't seem to have enough data to fully negate our attacks."
"What've you been able to do about measuring their effectiveness?" Admiral Reach asked. "Do you know how we can bolster our defenses to the same potency?"
"To some extent, yes," Lieutenant Gold replied. "Our power armor already proved to be effective and the Gnosis can take some of the punishment of their larger weapons. The bubble weapon … that one concerns us though." She brought up a video of the incident. "We were unable to recover what did that but Agent Alexander may be able to fill in some blanks."
"Do we even know what that was?" Desmond gestured to the screen. "It wiped out shields fast but didn't even touch theirs."
"Another frequency issue." Lieutenant Gold shrugged. "My own scans showed they rapidly cycled through various fields and somehow, that

bubble still didn't damage them. Schematics would be nice but for now, we simply have to be ready for them to do it. I've marked exactly what it looked like on the scanner moments before they let it loose."

Admiral Reach nodded. "You've uploaded this to the fleet?"

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Gold tapped the side of the monitor. "At the orders I received from high command, I disseminated these videos to all military commanders. They have them to research and study."

"Excellent." Reach narrowed his eyes. "What're the chances of us surviving another exchange with these creatures?"

"I'm merely speculating based on my research," Lieutenant Gold replied. "And my first field of study is not military tactics. However, considering their technology and what we've learned alone, I'd say we've increased our survivability exponentially. We understand so much more now, we can defend against it. Providing we work on counters soon."

Desmond checked his tablet and noted she'd sent a lengthy report. "Are those recommendations in this file?"

"Among many other things, sir. The technical details are all fully laid out and prepared for the engineers to assist with implementation."

"Good." Admiral Reach turned to Cassie. "Agent Alexander, are you ready to present your own information?"

"I am." Cassie paced by Lieutenant Gold and accessed the screen with her tablet. She brought up an image of one of the people. "First off, we know they call their race the Pahxin from our interrogation. The ones who attacked us are a faction within that race, the Tol'An. They seem to be some kind of fanatical group."

"What're they fanatical about?" Admiral Reach asked.

"Technology. Collecting it, at least." Cassie shrugged. "Their exact mission statement was not available for study and I'm inferring their obsession based on the notes they've taken on the Orb." She put an image of the Orb up. "This came from one of the enemy devices. They had it in their mission briefing and it was amidst a set of messages all marked as high priority. Each member of the alien crew were required to study this."

“The Orb?” Admiral Reach frowned. “We knew they were after the Orb, Agent. What’s the point?”
“This … is not our Orb.” Cassie’s message made them all fall silent. Even the scribe looked up. “Those of us who have studied the device extensively always suspected there were others. The AIA itself investigated alien life but we couldn’t draw any concrete conclusions, not even with full access to the device.
“However, the alien tech proves out that our Orb is one of many and this race of creatures, these aliens, are attempting to bring them all together.”
“For what purpose?” Desmond asked. “Why are they doing it?”
“These were soldiers,” Cassie replied. “The why wasn’t listed. They were told to collect the Orb at all cost. Furthermore, they’ve been lingering around our solar system for several weeks planning this assault. They knew precisely when the Gnosis was to leave and gave you plenty of time to get well away from the planet before attacking.”
“We suspected that …” Desmond sighed. “I guess confirmation is nice. So what else did you pull from it?”
“The more specific details and personal information from different alien creatures are in my report,” Cassie said. “Their commanders believed this would be an easy extraction. Their initial attack force was twice the size of what we faced. However, when the Gnosis left, they split so they might save some time.”
Admiral Reach’s brows lifted. “Doing what?”
“Going after another one.” Cassie brought up a star chart on the screen. “Here. Thirteen solar systems away from our current location. The rest of their force went to a planet all the way out there to gather another Orb. You see, I’ve now confirmed the race responsible for these devices was spread across the cosmos.”
Desmond squinted at the screen. “You think they left one of these on every planet they seeded, right?”
“Yes, I think they’re responsible for sentient life spreading throughout the galaxy,” Cassie replied. “And they eventually wanted us to find the Orb and take to the stars ourselves. Maybe join them … but I’m of the impression something happened. They’re gone and now their children

are rushing to find the answers to where they came from."
"And punch their brothers in the face while doing so," Admiral Reach muttered. "Fascinating discoveries, Agent. You have the coordinates for this other planet?"
"They're in the report," Cassie replied. "Our hyperspace drives could make the trip in ten hours. The aliens have had a four day head start but I can tell you this. Their smaller ships weren't as efficient with faster than light travel. If you intend to stop them … if you want to intervene, we will very likely catch them unawares while they attempt to extract that new Orb."
"Or while they're in the middle of a massive battle," Desmond said. "After all, the planet they're going after might be just like ours. Inhabited with people who aren't ready to just hand over their stuff."
Admiral Reach nodded. "Yes, I expect as much." He stood. "I am taking all of your notes to the council and will discuss our next steps. It looks like we need to make some fast decisions. Desmond, I recommend you take Lieutenant Gold and Agent Alexander back to the Gnosis right away. I'll contact you there with our decision."
"Yes, sir." Desmond stood and offered a salute as the flag officer left the room. He turned away from the door. "Grab your things. We'll be wheels up in thirty minutes."
Cassie watched him leave, her heart racing in her chest. After four days of study, things seemed to really move into high gear. Leaving the planet at short notice made her nervous but she understood the urgency. Once the military knew what they were up against and what their enemies were doing, they were going to try to stop them.
After presenting them a valid reason to go after the aliens, Cassie knew in the back of her head they'd be heading out soon. There was still a chance the high council would recommend they hold off and not risk their ships on the errand. However, the Admiral seemed persuasive in his way and she expected that after a short debate, they'd relent.
The amount of pushback they provided would all depend on how close they were to finishing their new military ship. Those vessels damaged in the initial fight had been restored to fighting condition.

Reports suggested they had some time left to finish all repairs, they could perform them while patrolling the system.
Some of the engineers at Gamma Alpha worked up plans to retrofit them with better defenses and some heavier offensive capabilities. Now that data existed to compare against, they knew how to give the rest of the fleet more of an edge in combat. The challenge came down to whether they could do it in time.
Doctor Harper helped put a schedule together so they wouldn't have to take more than a couple ships down at a time for updates. Shuttles were being packed with different types of equipment, supplies to upgrade shields and weapon systems. Calibration of the technology would be a solid start but in some cases, sturdier components were needed to withstand the extra energy output.
Performing such upgrades, or at least helping to ensure they were performing the proper upgrades would've been a job for Cassie had she not been drafted to help the Gnosis with their potential mission. The thought of leaving the solar system never crossed her mind. She'd been an analyst for so long, field work started to look like it wouldn't happen.
Now I get the chance to put some of these skills to use.
Lieutenant Gold patted her shoulder on the way out. "I'll see you on the shuttle, Agent."
"Um … you too." Cassie replied. Hurrying back to her quarters, she grabbed the three bags she packed the night before and took a brisk walk toward the landing field. A tiny part of her brain screamed at her about how she might never see Earth again if she boarded the ship. Going into war, being a crew member on a battleship, might be the last thing she ever did.
They can use me. I know it. I've got the experience and knowledge to help.
They'd need to study the ship schematics they took from the alien computers. Cassie had them all stored on her computer and assumed Captain Bradford would as well. Once they were aboard, she would send him a meeting invitation to go over the weaknesses and strengths of the opposition.

Cassie stepped outside into a warm breeze. Soldiers and technicians dashed about and massive transports moved heavy equipment to various parts of the structure. She'd been to Gamma Alpha several times but never seen it bustling in such a manner. The controlled chaos made her head spin.

Technicians installed new weapons at the hard points around the base and enhanced anti-aircraft cannons occupied the hills to either side of the structure. An energy field would be installed soon, something to provide some protection against a crashing vessel or projectiles. Each new addition made Gamma Alpha that much safer.

The shield technology existed before but with a little help and determination, engineers found a way to make the energy consumption far more efficient. These new deflectors could be raised as soon as enemies were detected closing in on Earth. Eventually, a method to keep them on at all times would be discovered.

Maybe major cities need the same treatment. It's a miracle the attackers only hit this place. Had they gone after a couple of large population centers, our military may have been too distracted to stop them from achieving their goals.

The question became whether they chose not to do so because they were civilized, didn't think of it or simply didn't have the manpower to pull it off. The basics of their plan were laid out in the computer: distract the military in orbit, hit the facility hard with ground troops and claim the Orb for their own.

Nothing in the orders suggested they had a contingency plan if they couldn't break through the defenses. They committed everything to the attack. While the aliens lingered in the solar system studying humanity, they may have discovered that Earth didn't know there were other creatures in the universe.

The invasion itself may have been enough of a surprise for them to risk everything.

Cassie arrived at the shuttle at the same time as the others. The whine of the turbine made it impossible to hear but Desmond gestured for them to board ahead of him. He followed, slapping a button on the wall to close the door. The moment it sealed, they were plunged into

near silence. Alerts from the cockpit computers were the only sounds.
“We’ll be at the Gnosis in fifteen minutes,” Desmond said. “Stow your things and we’ll get moving right away.”
Cassie stuffed her bags into a storage bin at the back and took a seat, strapping in. The shuttle she took from her home in Geneva to Gamma Alpha was far more comfortable, with civilian luxuries the military vessel didn’t bother with. Her seat lacked padding, just cold metal and the walls were utilitarian without panels to hide the infrastructure beneath.
The Gnosis isn’t like this. These smaller ships must’ve been cheaper this way.
Because people were expected to live on the Gnosis, the engineers made it as comfortable as possible. One of the larger expenses came from the way they gave it some personality, just shy of an ancient luxury liner from the nineteen hundreds. The recreation areas had burgundy carpets and warm toned fabric panels on the walls.
The more technical areas erred on the side of high tech with metal floors and no-nonsense brown cushioned seats. But their quarters were designed to give people a chance to unwind in a pleasant way. Psychologists helped to design some of the finer points of the ship after several studies suggested prolonged space travel might be mentally unbalancing.
Defense ships tended to stay in orbit for short periods of time, essentially going on patrol for a few days at a time before rotating out their crews. It allowed people to be on planet enough to shake off any deleterious side effects of space travel but it didn’t give researchers much to go on concerning their mental state.
Now I get the opportunity to help prove it for them with this next trip.
The ship launched, lifting slowly upward before tilting toward the sky. Cassie gripped her safety straps, drawing a deep breath just before the thrusters kicked in. They were hurtled away from the surface, the ship rattling wildly as they went. She did her best to remain cool, especially since Desmond and Salina didn’t seem to even notice.
The turbulence became far worse the higher they went until the straps dug into her shoulders and made her head ache. Suddenly, it all

stopped and the ship became silent and still. The inertial dampeners kicked in as they broke orbit, promising a smooth ride the rest of the way. Cassie forced herself to relax, tension slowly lifting from her muscles.

"First time in orbit?" Salina asked.

"No," Cassie replied. "But it is the first time I've had to get here so quickly. Civilian ships tend to take a little more time. They gradually ascend."

Desmond nodded. "Yeah, they're more cautious. Anyway, we haven't had time to really get to know each other much it's been so busy. Plus, your file's a little light. You probably know everything there is to know about us but … maybe you can share some details about yourself."

Cassie's cheeks burned. "I've seen the crew files for the Gnosis but I didn't pour over them in great detail. Um … so … I'm originally from California but moved to Geneva to attend the Advanced Technical Academy. The AIA recruited me just before I graduated and I've been working with them ever since."

"How'd your parents feel about that assignment?" Desmond asked.

Cassie looked away. "I'm afraid they … well, they died before I graduated. I'd like to think they would be happy for me but dad tended to be a conspiracy theorist. He probably would've had some strong opinions about my employers and what they were up to."

Desmond smiled, though she saw more sadness than anything in his eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that. My dad was the same way, actually. Always looking in the shadows for a story other people didn't want him to hear." He sighed and shook his head. "Anyway, I grew up in Florida and Salina there is the most uptight Oregonian you'll ever meet."

"Always appreciate the praise, Captain." Salina smirked. "You'll find a fairly diverse group on the Gnosis from all corners of the Earth. Our bridge crew is mostly American with the exception of Deacon Neville, who is one of our pilots. He's from London originally."

"I'd like to offer—" Desmond interrupted himself as his computer began to ding. He placed something in his ear and turned away. "Go

ahead, sir." A pause. "What? Are you … serious? That fast?" He nodded slowly. "I see. We're not quite aboard but will be there shortly. I'll contact you once we're there."
"What's going on?" Salina asked.
"Admiral Reach spoke to the council and they've already agreed that we need to get out there." Desmond seemed shocked. "He made quite the point about the head start the aliens had and how we needed to get moving."
Cassie narrowed her eyes. "What're the orders?"
"We're to find out why they want the Orb," Desmond replied. "And stop them from getting this one. Whatever information we can dig up. If, for some reason, the new Orb is not protected, they want us to bring it back to Gamma Alpha."
"What about defense here?" Salina looked at Cassie. "We all know that we're in a situation that's pretty tenuous with that."
Desmond shook his head. "They're close on the sister ship to the Gnosis, the one that's more military leaning. The rest of the fleet is repaired and they're upgrading them as we speak. But, the council doesn't believe the aliens are going to attack again soon. After all, they haven't had a chance to find out they failed yet."
"And it could take time," Cassie added. "After all, even if they were expecting a communication transmission, it wouldn't have arrived yet. Our best bet is to use the hyperspace drive and get there as soon as possible."
"We'll need some precise coordinates," Salina said.
"We have them." Cassie grinned, tapping her computer. "We took them from the aliens along with a star chart of the destination. We'll be able to hop in and take a look with long range scanners before diving into a full-on battle. And considering that I calculated a ten hour trip, we'll be able to examine the schematics for their ships, giving us a tactical advantage."
"At least the ones they left at Earth," Desmond said. "Okay, so we have clearance to depart as soon as we're ready. I'll contact Vincent and let him know we're mission active. I expect we'll be leaving the solar system in less than an hour." He paused. "Can't decide how I feel

about it."
"A rational emotion would be fear," Salina pointed out. "Though I expect no one on board's normal enough for that."
Desmond chuckled. "No, we've all been itching to get moving. Unfortunately, our first trip involves combat. Still, we can't complain too much. After all, this is the opportunity of a lifetime, right?"
"Definitely," Cassie said. "One of the most historic events for humanity since we first set foot on the moon … since the discovery of the Orb even. Pressing beyond what so many people thought was a prison. We've conquered distance and now, we have the chance to see what's out there. For good or ill, we're the pioneers of our species."
Salina hummed. "So no pressure at all then, right?"
"None at all." Desmond motioned with his head toward the cockpit. "We're about to dock with the ship. Get ready. When we disembark, we're going to be busy for a while."

***

Vincent waited in the hangar bay for the Captain's shuttle to land. He'd received word before they left to expect an AIA agent who was joining the crew and to have the ship ready for immediate departure. They did everything they could without the coordinates for their destination and all on-duty personnel were at their stations.
Fighters were lined up, prepared to launch. They had enough backup vessels to replace the one they lost in the initial fight. Lieutenant Hal Brown had sufficiently recovered to return to his duties and already had a session with a psychologist to ensure he was mentally prepared. After being cleared for active duty, he returned to his unit.
The marines had now had a couple of days of downtime and were itching for another shot at the enemy. Their eagerness didn't sit well with Vincent but he understood the necessity of such warriors in the military. If everything had gone according to plan, those men would've been terribly bored with the original plan.
We're putting them to the test now. I should be grateful they're here.
Vincent always looked forward to space travel and visiting other star

systems. He was an explorer at heart, always curious about what was beyond the horizon. The Gnosis assignment had been his dream come true and when they got the distress call from Earth, his heart sank. He'd studied tactics in the academy. He knew how to conduct an offensive but the idea of actively serving in a war hadn't really occurred to him. After so many years of relative peace, with only minor skirmishes springing up here and there, he thought conflict might finally be behind the human race.

To discover otherwise shocked him likely as much as it did the rest of the people on Earth.

The shuttle landed and Captain Bradford disembarked, saluting the soldiers standing by the ramp. Vincent moved out to greet them and offered his own salute. "Welcome aboard, Captain. We're just about ready to get underway. Once we have some hyperspace coordinates, we'll be good to go."

"Thank you," Desmond said. "I'd like to introduce you to Agent Cassandra Alexander. Agent, this is Commander Vincent Bowman."

"A pleasure." Vincent shook her hand.

"Thank you, Commander." The Agent stepped back and admired the ships around them.

"If you'd all like to follow me, we've got quarters set up and Chief Engineer Webber would like a word with you before we depart."

Vincent shrugged. "He has some concerns about the hyperdrive."

"Understood. I'll address him now." Desmond gestured to Salina. "You should take your post on the bridge. Cassie, you've got the coordinates so stow your things and get up there as well. Get Zach to program them in, do some predictive analysis and when I settle Nathaniel down, we'll get out of here."

"Yes, sir." Vincent gestured for Cassie to follow him. "Right this way."

"I'll see you both later," Salina said, heading off in another direction.

"So … the AIA." Vincent tried for some small talk. "I've never met a fully-fledged agent. Not that I'm aware of at least."

"We could be anywhere, that's true." Cassie grinned. "Though I can say there's less clandestine work going on in our own ships than you'd imagine. If it helps, this is the second time I've been on this ship. The

first was long before it was commissioned. They barely had the life support systems working."
Vincent nodded. "I didn't come aboard until two weeks before our maiden voyage. That was a crash course in systems. Those of us who came on late had a lot of work to do, a ton to learn. Definitely worth it but challenging to say the least. Especially the more esoteric systems … like the hyperdrive."
"What is the engineer's concern?" Cassie asked. "Is he worried about the elemental mixtures or the distance we have to go?"
"As you probably know, no one's gone into hyperspace for more than an hour. We've heard rumors of a ten hour trip." Vincent shrugged. "Sounds pretty risky to me and I think the engineer just wants to voice his concerns to the captain. I'm surprised the doctor isn't in line to talk about it to be honest."
"Yes, I understand. Simulations suggest we won't notice." Cassie paused a moment. "But we both know real life and simulations aren't entirely fair comparisons, right?"
"Exactly." Vincent took her down a corridor and paused before an open door. "This is you. Please, make yourself at home."
The quarters were only a little smaller than his own with a bed, a desk and a refresher for getting cleaned up. She had enough room to have two people inside without it being cramped but not much more. Much of the crew had to live communally. These private rooms were reserved for VIPs and high ranking officers.
"Thank you," Cassie said. She dropped her things off. "Can you show me to the bridge? They hadn't designated where it would be when I was here last."
"Of course." Vincent gestured down the hall. "The elevator down here goes straight there. Just hop in it and take it to the top. It requires security clearance but I've already had you added to the system. It works on DNA."
"Nice." Cassie smiled. "I suppose we should go make history then, hm? Even if it will end with a fight."
"Indeed." Vincent sighed as they boarded the elevator. "So you're familiar with the alien's technology?"

“And ours,” Cassie replied. “I’ve been hip deep in studying the Orb for several years now. The AIA has quite a few gadgets that came from it. I’ve got a bunch of them in my stuff. Hopefully, they’ll come in handy but even if they don’t, my computer’s got some fantastic upgrades. I might be able to fashion them into something useful for the ship.”
“I’m sure the engineers will be bothering you quite a bit,” Vincent said. “They’re always on the lookout for improvements. Hey, I had a question if you don’t mind … about the AIA.”
“Go ahead, but we’ve only got a moment.”
“Do you guys really learn all the crazy infiltration stuff? Hacking, fighting, you know …”
Cassie nodded. “And we constantly have to practice, even when we’re primarily assigned to research. They never know when one of us might have to go into the field and so we’re always prepared. I honestly thought it was overkill until I got on that shuttle to come up here.”
“Now?”
“I’m grateful they insisted I learn so much.”
The doors opened and Vincent let her go first. Desmond had yet to arrive from his visit to engineering but the others bustled through their activities, preparing for departure. Vincent directed Cassie to a free station near Salina’s. She already had a login to their network so she inserted her tablet into the dock and started typing.
He turned to his own reports, going through the checklist from other departments. Each section lead reported ready with only engineering appearing red on the list. Vincent expected as much and wondered how the captain would fare with Nathaniel. They didn’t have a choice, so one way or another, they would be on their way shortly. Complaining merely delayed things.

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Desmond arrived in engineering and Lieutenant Commander Nathaniel Webber immediately met him at the door. He was a bald man, short at five-eight but he carried himself with a lot of feisty

dignity. The neat goatee gave him a tough look but at forty-seven, he'd long since given up any sort of trouble off duty.
"What's going on, Nathaniel?" Desmond asked. "We have to get moving. The orders came from the council."
"I understand, Captain, but we've got to take a moment before we just dive into this. The hyperdrive's been tested, yes … but I'm not sure what's going to happen if we put ourselves into a long-distance trip of ten hours."
"What do the simulations say?"
Nathaniel waved his hand at him. "You know as well as I do what those are good for." He motioned for him to follow him. "Come into my office for a moment." They entered the private room before the engineer continued his argument. "What if we melt down?"
"What're the chances of that and how paranoid are you being?"
Desmond held his hand up. "The question is, do you honestly think that there's a danger or are you simply being overly cautious? Because right now, after what happened, we don't have the luxury of waiting around for more testing. We have to go. Now."
Nathaniel nearly answered immediately but he stopped himself and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm just being overly cautious but I think I've got good cause."
"All I can ask you to do is ensure you've taken every safety precaution possible." Desmond smiled. "Beyond that, we're going to be playing a little fate. I'm pretty confident that it's not going to be any different going all the way out there than it was to return home from our first trip. Think about it. The system is designed for this."
"I know … and I don't mean to be the one to cry wolf before we've even seen some fur …" Nathaniel ran his hand over his head and nodded. "I'll make sure we get there. Somehow and no matter what, we'll make it."
"Look on the bright side, we have an AIA agent on board and she's studied all this stuff. From what I've been led to believe, her understanding of our systems is second to none. You'll be able to tap into her experience just after we take off. Maybe she can help and she's got the data we took from the aliens."

“And we have access to it?”
Desmond nodded. “All of it. She’s on full share mode so take advantage while you can. You know how the AIA can be.”
“Not really, no … but I’ll definitely reach out to her.” Nathaniel stood up straighter. “Alright, Captain. I’ll sign off and we’ll get out of here. Thanks for the quick talk. I appreciate it.”
“I understand and thank you for not pushing back until I had to give you a direct order.” Desmond patted him on the shoulder. “It’s time to see what your ship can do, Lieutenant Commander Webber. Can you fire up the hyperdrive as we input some coordinates taking us far beyond where any human has even thought to go?”
“Yes, sir … I do believe I can.”

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Chapter 5

Desmond returned to the bridge and paused just inside the door, taking a look at the officers working at their stations. Zach glanced back and called out, “Captain on the bridge.” This drew the attention of the others and Desmond raised a hand, letting them know to continue what they were doing.

He took his seat and leaned over to Vincent. “Are we ready to go? Nathaniel should’ve signed off.”

“He did, sir. Agent Alexander has provided the coordinates to our destination and she’s working with Salina on the final predictive analysis before we depart. We’re ready to leave Earth’s orbit on your command and we should be able to initiate hyperspace within twenty minutes after that.”

Desmond frowned and nodded. “Okay. Zach, take us out of orbit. Salina, get me a com to Admiral Reach, please. Priority Two.”

Established communication protocols put together five major priorities. They ranged from not at all urgent (five) to there’s a major disaster occurring (one). The most commonly used option was three which allowed the recipient of the contact to finish whatever they were doing before accepting the contact.

Two meant they needed to speak right away but there was no emergency currently happening.

“Yes, sir.” Salina tapped her touch screen several times before announcing, “You are connected.”

“Admiral, this is Captain Bradford and we are leaving orbit now. Any last orders?”

“Come back alive, Desmond. We need your ship and your crew. If you don’t think you can take the enemy, get your asses back here and report in. Understood?”

“Loud and clear, sir.” Desmond smiled. “We’ll talk soon. Close channel and alert the ship that we will be entering hyperspace in approximately twenty minutes.”

Cassie spoke quietly to Salina but the bridge was really too small not

to hear her. “Is it really so jarring? I mean, I’ve only read about the simulations. You guys have actually done it. Do people need to brace and all that?”

“For the initial entry,” Salina said, “yes, we do. Once we’ve established ourselves, movement about the ship is normal. We haven’t encountered any turbulence while in FTL. However, we didn’t really go that far.”

“I see.” Cassie cleared her throat. “Here’s to new experiences, huh?”

The ship’s engines kicked on and the hull vibrated ever so slightly. Earth occupied the majority of the view screen for a brief moment and then it did not. They peered into deep space, moving swiftly away from their home. The next stars out there would be totally unfamiliar with new patterns to catalog.

If only we were going for such a peaceful reason. Desmond, like the rest of the crew, looked forward to seeing the rest of the universe. He studied to be a soldier but he always thought it would be an unnecessary precaution. Racing to stop another species never crossed his mind. Had someone warned him about an invasion, he would’ve thought they were crazy.

He wondered about Agent Alexander, how she would fare on this mission. She supposedly underwent some pretty intense training to get where she was, both physical and mental. Desmond never really thought about the AIA so he didn’t feel inclined not to trust her simply because of her chosen career path.

Others might not be so easy going. The only thing anyone knew about the AIA involved rumors. They were shadowy though public enough to know it. This made them scarier to the right kind of people, those who liked to explore conspiracy theories. Some people aboard would likely have questions for her about what she did.

Desmond just wanted to know that she could do her job and maintain a calm disposition. So far, she’d proven to be pretty amazing. Getting into the alien computers and extracting the data couldn’t have been easy. It proved she knew what she was doing, that she had the training she spoke of and moreover, she applied it brilliantly.

That unto itself gave him confidence in her abilities. He’d need to take

a few minutes to talk to her when they were fully underway, maybe get to know where she was coming from. If she had any disadvantage at all, it was a lack of time in space. But as with all things, a little time and experience went a long way.

Cassie would be fine if not by the time they arrived, then shortly after.

"We are nearly in position to engage hyperdrive," Zach said.

"Predictive analysis?"

"Complete," Salina said. "I've sent a minor adjustment to your course and it's been verified by Agent Alexander. Please confirm."

Zach took a moment and nodded. "Confirmed. I'm ready to initiate hyperspace on your mark, Captain."

Desmond paused for a moment, preparing himself for the biggest order of his career. When he told his pilot to send them hurtling through space to another solar system, he would be taking another giant step for mankind. This one came with so many repercussions. First, they'd know they could do it and second, they'd find out if they could hold their own against the aliens.

Again. This might be an easier fight depending on what we find there.

"Engage." He spoke the word firmly, but hoped he didn't put too much energy behind it. Too much passion or emotion wouldn't do anyone any good. He needed to be the picture of calm and he intended to stay that way even if his insides were dancing. "Let's see what's at the other end of this adventure."

Zach nodded once before tapping the controls. The ship began to hum and a low whine began to build deep within the ship. Desmond sat back in his chair and drew a deep breath, forcing himself not to grip the chair arms tightly. They'd been through this twice before, once to get to the edge of their solar system and once to come back to battle the aliens.

A third time shouldn't have affected him at all but he couldn't pretend to be inhuman. This new technology might not work in a spectacular fashion. It may simply fail at best or flat out explode. The screen went dark as the ship shimmered out of their reality as they knew it and into the alternate dimension of hyperspace.

Desmond always had a problem accepting the explanation he was

given about hyperspace. He preferred to think of it as the ship simply going very fast but they insisted that they were shifting beyond the natural realm where certainly rules did not apply. This allowed them to race along without killing everyone on board.

Technically, the ship was simply moving at maximum speed but in this other space, they were able to cover up to twenty times the distance. A trip to the outer edge of their space, at a reasonable speed, took about forty minutes. When they raced back at three-quarters full, they got back in half that.

Now they'd be moving at full speed and it would still take several hours. The time depended on all the small corrections the ship's computer would make along the way and so it would be variable. Such a trip might've taken twenty hours under a different set of circumstances.

Researchers suggested they'd be able to better predict these things with further trials. The Gnosis was performing those tests now, in production. Salina was recording everything about the ship during the flight. Engine performance, structural integrity, circuitry decay and crew efficiency all went into a massive database to be studied at a later time.

They shut off the exterior cameras and went to sensors only. This meant the view screen stopped showing outside and instead began displaying internal system monitoring. The initial plunge made the ship rattle for a moment but it smoothed out quickly, just as before. Tension on the bridge increased dramatically until Salina spoke up.

"All systems read normal. We are now in hyperspace."

Zach clapped his hands and hooted. "Amazing! I knew this complicated mess would hold together!"

"Was that a concern?" Cassie asked. "Were you guys worried something would happen?"

"It's only the third time we've done it," Vincent replied. "So I think people were a bit nervous."

Cassie nodded and returned to what she was doing, her eyes wide.

Desmond stood and began giving orders. "Alright, Zach, I want Deacon up here to relieve you while we're in hyperspace. When we

arrive, you've got to be back on duty. Get some food and downtime. You'll need it. Vincent, work with Dennis to ensure the pilots are ready when we arrive. They should also get some rest. Same with the marines."
"I'm on it, sir." Vincent got on his com and started making connections.
"Agent Alexander, I believe Salina, you and I have something to discuss in regards to these ships. I'd like a quick briefing that we can disseminate to the other section heads as soon as possible. Then everyone gets a few hours downtime before we arrive and have to be awake for God knows how long." Desmond took a breath and clapped his hands. "Ready?"
A round of affirmatives filled the room.
"Then I'll get out of your hair to make it happen."

***

Cassie expected the alien technology briefing to be a hyper-efficient affair with direct questions and severity but Desmond surprised her. He kept the meeting pleasant and though they discussed sensitive, serious topics, he didn't allow it to become a brooding exploration into the capabilities of their enemies. She admired how easy it was to talk in his presence.
Salina, on the other hand, remained just as down to business as she had been during their time on Earth together. She held valuable insights into the situation and offered tactical advice throughout the discussion. After an hour of exploring their own research data and what they found in the alien computers, she proved to have a near photographic memory.
"Let me sum up," Desmond said, "they've got shields like ours but they have a better understanding of how to modulate them to greater effect, right?"
Cassie nodded. "Yes, I've been trying to find a way to make ours do the same but I'll need to speak with an engineer so I don't design something beyond system specs. I know we're able to do it but we

have to do so in a way that won't burn out existing components."
"Okay." Desmond made a note on his tablet before continuing. "We also know their weapons are on par with ours except for the strange sphere thing they used toward the end of the engagement. Any theories on why they waited so long?"
"Extreme power drain," Salina said. "All my readings indicate they were essentially useless for at least a minute after it happened. Had we not attacked so quickly, it might've even taken them longer to recover."
"Sounds like a parting shot to me." Desmond rubbed his chin, staring into space. "Maybe that ship was trying to sacrifice itself to give the others a chance to finish their assignments."
"They didn't know we could get back so quickly," Salina pointed out. "After all, they waited to attack until we were as far away as we would get."
"None of them knew where you were going either," Cassie added. "You might've still been in hyperspace when they made their move."
"Great points." Desmond made another note. "Armor similar to ours … Maneuverability, slightly better on the smaller ships and their fighters … Well, they didn't turn out to be as scary as Salina predicted."
"No," Salina conceded, "but they do have an enhanced form of inertial dampeners … either that or their pilots are simply conditioned to heavier G-force. Their maneuvers were pretty spectacular and I know all of our pilots have studied the data exhaustively. They'll be ready for their next engagement."
"Good. I'm glad to hear it." Desmond gestured to the screen again. "Have we figured out their communications yet? Can we jam them or at least interfere with their ability to chat?"
Cassie fielded the question. "I can't say yes for sure yet but I've been working on it. Whether I'll have an application ready for this next conflict, it's hard to say. Our normal methods wouldn't work though. They use a lot of energy to ensure their coms function, however. This gives us an advantage because I think I can intercept them."
"I'd love to see how you intend to," Salina said. "Imagine how much

easier this fight will be if we're able to monitor their coms."
Desmond smirked before saying, "It won't matter much if they know about it. Are we going to be able to do this without alerting them?"
Cassie shrugged. "Unfortunately, the documentation we have from them doesn't really dive into their scanning abilities. If they have a mature sensor and monitoring system, we might not be able to but if we're throwing all kinds of frequencies around, jamming and such, then who knows how far we can go?"
"They'd be so busy cleaning up our interference," Salina said, "they may not notice we're listening."
"I like it," Desmond replied. "Okay, so I'm going to give this briefing to the others. You will both be present in case of any technical questions. When we're done, I'll have Cassie work with Nathaniel to check on the shield modulation but don't put too much time into it. You need to get some rest and we've only got nine hours left to get everything done."
"Understood," Cassie replied. "Do we need to talk about anything else?"
"No, I've got all the data here and I've asked the extra questions I had." Desmond stood. "We'll meet up in the briefing room to finish. Thank you both for compiling all this. It's going to make a huge difference. Believe me."

***

The briefing didn't take long and Cassie gathered her things for a trip down to engineering. Chief Engineer Webber had attended the meeting but he left immediately along with the others. They all asked sensible questions, taking their briefings back to share with their people. None of them seemed nervous about the prospect of their assignment.
Perhaps they were simply too professional to show any sort of fear around their peers.
Desmond stepped close, speaking quietly. "Do you mind if I escort you to engineering? I'd like a word as we go."

“Yes, Mister Webber already left and I was hoping he’d remind me of how to get there. When I visited the ship last, there weren’t as many walls.”
Desmond grinned. “Would’ve been a lot easier to get around, that’s for sure. Come on.”
Cassie fell into step beside him, admiring the aesthetic they gave the place. It felt far less utilitarian than when she had visited it, more like a home. The intent was to ensure people didn’t feel like cogs in a machine. It was important for every crew member to have a sense of comfort, especially on a long space voyage.
“So, I know you’re from California and that you went to Geneva for school,” Desmond started. “What’re your hobbies, Agent?”
“Oh um … Well …” Cassie blushed. “I’ve always been really good with computers but I really love music. So when I’m not swamped, I write songs. Electronic stuff mostly ‘cause I can’t play an instrument, but programming beats and stuff? No problem. Living in Europe also means I had access to great performers.”
“Music lover.” Desmond smiled. “That helps to offset the image of an AIA agent essentially being a work machine that lives in the shadows of conspiracy.”
“No, we’re not like that.” Cassie scratched her head. “But I get the misunderstanding. It’s not like we’re transparent about our activities. Classified information tends to make us all a bit twitchy to share things. Still, I can assure you my colleagues are all quite normal with their different passions and extracurricular activities. No one lives in the office. Not all the time.”
“But it’s a busy job.”
“Of course, there’s a lot of work to do. Sixty-hour weeks are the norm but if we’re there longer, it’s the exception to the rule.” Cassie chuckled. “Of course, now that I’m here I suppose we’ll be working during waking hours.”
“No, we work by six hour shifts, with four going to make up what we call a cluster, or day. Traditionally, we work a full six hour shift at whatever our standard duty is, take a shift for training or maintenance then have the other two off for sleep and recreation. Time is

maximized and people have a chance to unwind without the threat of being back on in a few hours."
"I hadn't read about that," Cassie said. "Sounds like it'll work okay. We're a lot more flexible at the AIA but then again, we're not running the thing we're living on." She paused. "What about you? What're your hobbies? Even if I only gave you one of mine."
"I'm sure I'll get more out of you later," Desmond replied. "I'm a reader. Love classics. The fact we've got the Library of Congress loaded onto the computers here makes me very happy. That's how I unwind. Grab something I haven't read yet and lose myself for a while. I always sleep best after I've devoured a couple chapters."
"You sure that's not because they're boring?" Cassie smiled to show the question was a joke. "That you're reading stuffy material?"
Desmond chuckled. "Pretty sure. I'll let you know the next time I settle down for a shift." He paused at a door. "This is engineering. Nathaniel's a good man, but know he can be … stubborn. Good luck with the shields and be sure to get some rest before we arrive. You're going to want to be at your best during whatever happens."
"One more thing …" Cassie took him a few steps away, lowering her voice. "It involves protocol. I don't want there to be any confusion about my presence aboard your ship. I recognize I'm a civilian but until otherwise stated, I am referring to you as my direct superior. I'll do my best to speak appropriately with 'sir' and all that but do forgive me if I slip."
"Admiral Reach warned me about the AIA," Desmond replied. "He told me you folks like to take operational command on occasion. I'm glad to hear you haven't been given such an order. I'm not worried about you, Agent Alexander. So far, you seem to be in this for the right reasons and you've been nothing but honest and helpful. Thanks for the quick talk."
"See you back on the bridge later then," Cassie called after him as he walked away. He waved and she took a quick breath before turning back to Engineering. She tapped the panel and opened the door, stepping into a noisy technological wonderland she had only read about prior to boarding the ship.

Panels lined the walls and several small maintenance corridors led off to different parts of the ship for fine, manual work. Much of the Gnosis could be repaired right from the center of engineering Cassie was standing in. The automated systems were incredible but occasionally, people needed to be involved. They could make their way to any part of the ship from there.

When she first saw how much access those tunnels had, the security part of her became nervous. If unauthorized personnel got in there, they could access any part of the ship. They got around it with DNA coding. If someone entered a section, doors would close trapping them inside.

These sensors were not linked to the central computer and so could not be hacked without getting into one of the tunnels. Even then, by the time the person got in there and started their mischief, they'd already be caught. It sounded foolproof but when they had time, Cassie intended to see about bolstering the security even more.

Nathaniel Webber approached her, all smiles. He didn't seem particularly pleased to see her despite the outward expression. She got the impression he felt her contribution would be unneeded and maybe he was right. One of the most important lessons she learned with the AIA was to never believe she was the sole person who could handle a problem.

Two sets of eyes were always better than one when it came to a problem after all. She hoped to impart this to the stubborn engineer.

"Welcome," Nathaniel said. "This is where the magic happens. I'll be honest and frank, Miss Alexander. I'm not sure what you'll be able to do down here that I haven't already been able to accomplish with my own people."

Miss again. I must look like a child or something. Cassie put on a smile to mask her annoyance. "I'm hoping I can offer some inspiration more than anything. I've brought some data I'd like to share and compare with our current setup. With any luck, the two of us can determine whether it's useful and can be implemented or if it's incompatible."

"I see." Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. "This is the frequency

modifications discussed during the briefing, right?"
Cassie nodded. "Exactly. That's how the enemy works their defenses."
"I've already thought about it." Nathaniel led her over to his terminal and tapped at the screen. He brought up the shield array system. "One of the early problems we managed to overcome with this ship involved evenly distributing power to all systems during heavy usage. Combat situations are the worst.
"When we're powering the engines for maneuverability, weapons, shields and maintaining life support, we're taxing the generators."
Nathaniel changed the screen to show the power relays. "Allowing the shields to cycle would essentially be like rebooting them over and over again, which would put a heavier draw on power."
Cassie scrutinized his screen for several moments before pulling out her tablet and tapping away. The problem he spoke of had been addressed by the aliens but it may have been by design. Still, the way he described the act sounded terribly inefficient and certainly something they should have been able to account for.
The shield system on the Gnosis was built like a brick wall. The idea was to harden it so much it would deflect mass driver weapons easily and energy weapons would simply not be powerful enough to punch through. This was an old way of thinking. As she read through the way the enemy shields worked, she noted the key difference.
They enabled their defenses to be flexible. Their shields reacted to attacks rather than just sat there waiting for one. An energy blast would be absorbed and mass drivers would be stopped though perhaps not as efficiently. That was their primary weakness.
Combining their method and the way the Gnosis currently operated would be the best of both worlds.
Cassie showed Nathaniel her tablet and explained what she saw, inviting him to educate her. By deferring to his expertise, she felt him coming around. His standoffish first impression might've been all stubbornness or maybe he worried she'd try to pull rank. Whatever problem he had with her to begin with melted away the deeper they delved into the alien technology.
"The problem I see," Cassie said, "is our focus on the energy wall

versus a fluid deflection."
"Altering our system won't be simple," Nathaniel replied. "But it can be done without a complete overhaul. It comes down to modifying the emitters and how they regulate the energy before creating the field. Unfortunately, we can't make this happen while in hyperspace because we can't properly test it. Nor can we do it when we arrive 'cause we'll likely need the shields up."
Cassie nodded. "Major system changes like this wouldn't work in the field without an absolute necessity. However, there's a minor change I'd like you to consider in regards to their sphere weapon. As you know, it nudged the Gnosis even at range. I have two proposals but one of them isn't as practical."
"Go ahead."
"On one hand, Lieutenant Gold discovered the energy reading and the pilot got the ship out of range quickly. If we're going to go with a retreat action, then we need a quicker tie-in with engineering so we can divert more power to the engines. An overdrive if you will. That should give us the boost we need to avoid any damage at all."
"Could work, yes. Though if I know the captain, he won't want to withdraw next time. What's your other thought?"
"We can attempt to match the frequency with our shields to do what they did while avoiding damage."
Nathaniel shook his head. "Too risky. Without the ability to test, if we failed, we'd take the full brunt. I have a third option but it involves some of your fancy applications."
"Oh?"
"You cracked their computer code so you understand how their security works. If you prepare ahead of time, you might be able to jam their system and delay the release of the weapon." Nathaniel brought up a simulation and showed how such a thing might work. "You could do anything from prevent the attack to destroying their reactor."
Cassie really looked at his proposal, considering how best to go about it. Sending a message to the ship telling it to delay release would definitely send a power surge throughout the system. Depending on their safety protocols, it would likely only short out some of their

panels but the result would come down to the weapon not discharging.

"I'll need to play around with it but I've got the data necessary in my computer." Cassie frowned in thought. "Yes, that's doable."

"While you take care of that, I'll see what can be done to tweak our shields without compromising functionality. At least this time, we'll have to go with what we've got. If only we had a little more time …"

Cassie nodded. "We can't afford delays. It may already be too late. Depending on what opposition the enemy has uncovered, of course."

Nathaniel turned back to his terminal. "All we can do is be ready this time and the next. Good luck, Miss Alexander. I look forward to working with you more."

As she left engineering, Cassie felt good about the contacts she was making with the different department heads on the ship. Commander Bowman seemed okay as did Lieutenant Gold. Winning over Nathaniel helped a lot and she only had a couple more to go. Undoubtedly, she'd have her chance to talk to them before the first mission concluded.

But just then, she needed to work on the jamming application. She might not get the rest she needed after all but at least they'd have a fighting chance against the spherical weapon. Would their gathered intelligence be enough to turn the tide of a battle? The aliens had time to study them as well.

This might come down to who did the best research. Of course, they can't possibly anticipate we'll be able to follow them. After all, they were convinced humanity would be a push over. They divided their force as a result. The audacity of sending a single ship might be intimidating … or it could be the single worst idea we've come up with.

Time would tell if Earth made the right call in pursuing the enemy and involving themselves in galactic affairs, such as they were. The enemy databases didn't speak about other races out in space, other civilizations beyond their own. Perhaps if one of their ship's computers would've survived, more comprehensive data would've been available.

As such, they had to learn a few things on their own. Cassie believed

the Gnosis was ready for such an adventure. Now they simply had to survive it to benefit from the spoils.

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Chapter 6

Desmond returned to the bridge when they were about to emerge from hyperspace. The calculation suggested thirty minutes and he needed some time to address the crew and prepare. Pilots boarded their fighters and bombers, marines filed down to the shuttles and the Gnosis felt on the verge of bursting from barely contained adrenaline. Zach relieved Deacon, the last of the primary bridge crew to take his seat. Those with the most experience took their posts and each department head sounded off their readiness. Desmond noted they were green across the board. When they arrived, all units would be as prepared for combat as possible.

Desmond received the report from Nathaniel that they were unable to make significant modifications to the shields. This was not unexpected news but it did disappoint him. The information went on to state that Cassandra may have found a way to disrupt the spherical attack. There was no indication she'd succeeded yet.

"Agent Alexander," Desmond said. "Nathaniel stated you were working on some kind of app to jam an enemy attack. Have you had any luck?"

"I wrote an application and tested it against their security protocols. Hardened systems will be a challenge but I'm confident I can at least delay their special weapon long enough for us to gain some distance." Cassie paused. "I just finished another simulation. If I can get more experience with some of their active defenses, I'll be able to improve this significantly."

"Excellent." Desmond glanced at the chronometer. They had ten minutes to go. Butterflies hit his stomach but he was able to quell them with a deep breath. When he left his quarters and headed to the bridge, he felt the tension building in the ship. He didn't sense fear per se but more anticipation. They wanted to get into the action.

Ten hours was a long time to think about a fight.

Desmond spent the next few moments going through minor reports, issues that didn't demand immediate attention. After the third one,

Zach called out that they had two minutes before emerging. He turned the screen to tactical in preparation for what was to come. The countdown began at thirty seconds and when he reached zero, the main screen changed to a frontal view.

The ship shuddered for a moment, shaking from the re-entry into real space. Lights flickered then remained steady. Zach's hands flew over his controls and as he applied retro thrusters, Desmond felt a hint of pressure as the inertial dampeners fought to keep up with the suddenness of their motion.

"Checking position," Salina announced. "We have arrived within ten-thousand kilometers of our intended coordinates."

"Fantastic job, everyone," Desmond said. "That's pretty damn impressive. Now, to the business at hand. System scan?"

Salina hummed. "The system rebooted when we came out of hyperspace. It's almost back up but that's … odd."

"Wait," Cassie jumped in. "Oh, I see what happened. When the lights flickered, we experienced a power surge. Several systems have been rebooted. I can work with engineering right now to find out if there's a short in the relay … If you don't mind."

Desmond nodded. "Please do. Let's get a quick diagnostic on all essential systems. If something happened on that re-entry, we want to know before we need those things. Vincent, have the pilots ready to launch at a moment's notice. Make every moment count, people. They don't have the disadvantage of a reboot so if they're out there, they know we're here by now."

Desmond stood and joined Salina at her station, watching the progress meter fill as the system came back online. He wondered if there was simply a glitch or if the distance itself had something to do with it. There was no precedent to base an opinion on, only simulation data and two short trips.

The after-action briefings would involve a lot of questions.

Salina began tapping at her console the moment the system came back online and put her findings on the main screen. Desmond turned to look at the data. Eight planets surrounded a star much like Sol. Hard and fast scans showed the fourth planet was the closest to Earth

standards with only slightly lighter gravity and an identical oxygen content.

We've talked about the Goldilocks planet before but I never thought we'd find one on our first trip out. Of course, I have to give the aliens the credit in this case. We're merely following them, not discovering on our own.

"Multiple ships discovered," Salina said. She motioned for Cassie to join her. "Look at those. There are five of the alien ships, we expected those but what about these? I don't even know what to call them but they're definitely inorganic. What do you make of them?"

"Different types of aliens," Cassie replied. "The inhabitants of the planet they're invading perhaps. They … seem to be in conflict."

"Maybe we can get them on the com and tell them we're here to help," Desmond suggested. "Hail them."

"I'm afraid they're unmanned, sir." Salina tapped at her console and nodded. "Yes, they are definitely unmanned and are coming from that larger, dome like structure orbiting the planet. It's some kind of defensive platform sending out these drones. No life forms in there either. It's totally automated."

"Great." Desmond sighed. "Means they won't be friendly to us either. How big are the drones?"

Salina replied, "Small. They appear to be fighter size. In fact, that's what the enemy is using to fight them but … they must've been at this for a while. There's debris in orbit … The alien ships."

"Estimated number?" Desmond asked.

"More than five," Cassie answered. "But there's plenty of debris from the indigenous technology as well. I'd be willing to guess there were a lot more of those orbital defenses before and now they're down to two."

Salina added, "Surface scans show a smaller scout vessel landed and a contingency of alien ground forces are converging on a structure but there is weapon's fire. I'm not sure what they're fighting. There's life on the surface but it isn't like Earth. No large congregations that would indicate cities. Just structures. Abandoned …" She turned to Desmond. "Or dead."

Desmond rubbed his chin and turned to his own screen, checking the diagnostic reports. They indicated all systems were operational. Cassie and Nathaniel had another test running, checking what might've caused the short but they hadn't found it yet. They didn't have time to thoroughly investigate everything before jumping into action.

"Zach, get us closer." Desmond sat down. "Vincent, when we're within range, launch all fighters. Raptor's on escort. Get the marines down to the ground and prevent the enemy from doing whatever they're doing. Tell them to be prepared for a serious fight … possibly from two groups."

Affirmatives rang through the bridge and the ship's thrusters ignited. Shields were raised and weapons powered on. As they advanced, they received additional information about the conflict raging ahead of them. The indigenous defense platforms showed massive energy readings. Powerful shields protected them but something else happened inside.

Salina's deep scan of the structure showed the vast majority of it was dedicated to manufacturing the drones. The entire thing was automated, leaving only enough room for a reactor which generated an enormous amount of energy, especially considering it was solar powered.

The efficiency of the platform was incredible as each subsection built a piece of the drones, churning them out quickly enough to constantly reinforce their numbers. As a result, it would've been very difficult to gain a beachhead in the planet's orbit and further explained why the aliens lost vessels and hadn't achieved their own objectives yet.

They may have only gotten this far because they studied their adversaries like us. Every moment of delay they had gave us time to arrive and intervene.

"Try to get the aliens on com," Desmond said. "Maybe we can make this exchange peaceful."

Salina spoke into her microphone with several different messages, tapping her screen every few moments. She finally shook her head. "I'm getting nothing but static on all frequencies, sir."

"Understood." Desmond gestured to Vincent. "Launch the fighters and

have them engage immediately. Anything that shoots back. Rules of engagement are wide open. For the marines, have them try to identify friendly organic targets. Everything else is fair game. Prioritize their lives above all else. I want everyone getting home after this mission."
"We will be in range to fire in less than three minutes," Zach said. "What're my target priorities?"
Desmond hesitated to answer. On one hand, he felt like the defense platforms should be their first order of business. They weren't going to stop generating drones to fight off invaders but on the other hand, attacking the aliens meant they would have to defend themselves on two fronts. They might make easier work of the remaining vessels with the help.
An idea hit him and he turned back to Vincent. "Get our bombers out there. I want those platforms taken down by them. The fighters focus on the fight close at hand and we'll aim for the alien capital ships. Zach, target the nearest ship. We'll go from there."
"Yes, sir. I'm on it now."
"Okay, this is it." Desmond glanced back at Cassie. "Agent Alexander, I hope you're ready in case they try their special attack. Beyond that, this is looking pretty straightforward, folks. Frequent reports from all parties away from the ship filtered through Commander Bowman. Here we go. Make your efforts count."

***

Lieutenant Kate Zeller began flying when she was old enough to see over the controls of her father's antique crop duster. They'd long been out of use but she learned to operate the thing and never looked back. Joining the military gave her an opportunity to do what she loved the most, only faster.
Sitting behind the controls of a fighter provided her with the most intense outlet for her need to push the envelope, to pit herself not only against an opponent but her own skills as well. As the other pilots in Mustang Squadron launched, she tapped her foot in anticipation. When finally she got the green light, she gunned the throttle, jetting

out into open space.
The challenge of a strange enemy so far from home further appealed to her competitive nature. No one else from Earth could boast what they were about to do and she fully intended to make the most of the experience. If these aliens decided to truly start a war, they did not understand what door they opened.
A last minute briefing let them know about the kink in the chain. The automated defenses protecting the planet sounded pretty nasty. They were already engaged with the aliens and would have to be dealt with before the Gnosis could safely take orbit. Bombers were en route and were being escorted by Charger squadron.
Kate checked out her scanner, bringing up the data on the drones. They were smaller than the Earth ships but not by much. Their hulls were dedicated to thrusters, allowing them precise maneuverability, and weapons. Each unit boasted energy weapons, tough enough that the computer suggested caution when engaging.
It's never good when the computer issues an actual warning, Kate thought. Luckily, their own defenses are subpar at best.
Indeed, they only seemed to be surrounded by environmental shields which wouldn't stop a solid hit from any weapon really. They relied on maneuverability and numbers to take down threats and considering the briefing said additional drones were constantly being replicated, it made sense.
If the people on this planet had a ship like the Gnosis as well, they could defend their home indefinitely.
And yet they don't even seem to be here. What happened on this planet? Lord, I bet the marines are going to find out.
"Listen up folks," Denis's voice filled her helmet. "We are within range. Break off with your wingmen and engage. Prioritize the aliens. They represent the greater threat. Any questions?" No one spoke up. "Then get to it."
Kate's wingman was Lieutenant Hal Brown. He'd been shot down in the last engagement and she felt somewhat responsible. Once they met up in the medical bay, he exonerated her immediately. He claimed he had been too aggressive and maybe he was right. They didn't know

what they were dealing with and he went straight for the throat.
“You ready?” Kate asked. “I’ll take lead.”
“Go for it,” Hal replied. “And I’m one hundred percent ready. Believe me, I had a lot of time to think about these guys while I waited for search and rescue.”
Kate winced. I bet he did. Hal flew on her right and she pushed ahead of him, taking the lead. He gave her some space as she enhanced her HUD, specifically the targeting system. The amber reticle had tiny lines branching off, touching squares that surrounded several enemy fighters. They plotted distance, speed and fed additional information back to the computer.
The ship rumbled from the speed. Inertial dampeners worked hard but they weren’t enough to fend off all the g-force, which pressed her into her seat. Her shoulders began to ache, a familiar sensation she’d grown to associate with her passion. It didn’t bother her anymore. A little pain allowed her to maintain a feel of the ship, giving her a physical connection to it.
Kate’s first target closed to within range. She engaged the side thrusters, nudging her to the left just enough for a better firing solution. The enemy flew wildly to avoid a couple drones, which buzzed around it with all the maneuverability of bees swarming around their hive. They were so close, they’d probably take splash damage from any explosions.
Stray shots blurred by, purple beams streaking off into the distance. Something clipped Kate’s shields, making them flare briefly. The HUD showed no appreciable damage. She narrowed her eyes and fired her mass drivers. As the guns erupted to her left and right, the vessel reacted with tiny vibrations through the frame.
Had she not been so familiar with the workings of the fighter, she might not have even noticed.
The first spread missed cleanly but as she fired a second time, a couple of the metal shards connected with one of the drones. An entire side of the small craft popped off and it tumbled, a bout of orange energy billowing from the hull before exploding some distance away. The other drone didn’t even hesitate and continued its assault.

The alien's shields continued to flare, each shot not quite enough to get through on their own but with the constant hammering, the defenses wouldn't last. Despite some pretty impressive evasion attempts, the alien couldn't shake his opponent and none of his friends were close enough to help.

Hal fired his beam weapons, striking the alien ship dead on the side. The shields lit up far brighter than what the drone had managed. Kate took advantage of the hit and blasted away at him. She was closing fast though and had time for one attack before having to evade or risk slamming into the target.

Their movements may have been erratic but they weren't going anywhere. Their dogfight kept them contained to a fairly small area. Kate's attack grazed the rear of her target and she veered off just as the drone let loose another flurry. The computer began to buzz, an indication that the defenses for her target were down.

Kate glanced over her shoulder in time to see pieces of its hull chipped away by the drone. She came around, trying for a better firing solution and Hal kept to her tail, moving with her. The alien dove, a swift direction change that might've broken bones even with solid inertial dampeners.

Finally, the drone seemed to overshoot him, giving the alien a second to breathe.

Hal called out, "I've got a lock. Firing." Several rounds from his mass drivers filled the air and Kate pulled up to give him some room. The enemy veered but chose the wrong direction, taking a full volley right on the top of his ship. Lights winked out on the target, the engines went dark and the pilot ejected a moment before his ship burst in all directions.

The drone spun in place and came straight at Kate, rapidly firing energy bolts in her direction. Several shots riddled her shields before she could roll to the side, avoiding the last of them. It flew by her, adjusting course and coming back around for another firing solution. She considered it for a brief moment before speaking up.

"We can't keep a tight formation with that thing. Break and get an angle."

“That won’t work when there’s more than one,” Hal said.
“I get that but hey, we’ve got time to worry about that later, right?”
Hal chuckled. “I guess … but not much. Okay, breaking now.”
They separated, giving themselves some distance as the attacking drone made another pass. This time, it flew between them from behind. Kate took the opportunity and fired but the drone flipped away, casually evading the attack. Hal fired as well and cursed over the com. “I had target lock on that thing!”
Time to try something new. Kate redirected herself, flipping around in such an extreme maneuver, her entire body felt like it was being crushed. The moment she had the drone in her sites, she went for lock, ignoring the ache in every bone. Tone buzzed and she fired a missile, hoping her AI could outfly her opponent.
The projectile started chasing the target and they zoomed off toward the others. It’s getting help! “Do you see that, Hal?”
“Yes, those things are terrifying.”
“Look out!” Hal’s warning came a moment too late as a beam weapon directly hit her after-shields. She maneuvered out of the way, letting one of the enemy alien ships fly by. It banked and came around, firing at Hal. He returned fire, tilting his ship to avoid their attack. The two nearly collided as they went by one another.
Kate redirected to fly after it but another ship came at her. “Hal, I’ve got one on me now too. We need to form up.”
“I’m a little busy. Rendezvous at the coordinates I’m sending you right now.” Her computer put a waypoint on her HUD. “Fight your way there.”
“On it.”
Banking hard left, she reversed the maneuver at the last second and once again put herself through some serious pain. The inertial dampeners screamed as she turned but the ploy worked. Her opponent bought the first maneuver and didn’t bother to redirect. This gave her a fantastic firing solution and she let loose a volley of ammo before following up with beams.
The alien didn’t have the chance to dodge before taking both attacks. The energy beams hit first, cutting through the shields and the mass

drivers ripped up the engines. Kate's target turned on its good engine, trying to limp off. She pulled up and fired again, finishing him off before spinning around to join Hal.
"This is Mustang One," Denis announced over the com. "We're being overwhelmed over here. Need some backup."
"You got yours, Hal?" Kate asked. "We need to go."
"Mine's bugging out but I can get him …" Hal hummed. "I'm breaking off. We'll regroup on Mustang One. How're you holding up?"
Kate checked and all systems were normal. Shields were not quite to one hundred percent after her near misses but they were recharging. Automated repair systems engaged, enhancing the relays to ensure power made it to weapons and shields equally. She made a minor adjustment, manually giving the shields some more.
"I'm good," Kate announced. "I'll follow your lead."

***

Cassie probed the enemy security protocols, attempting to establish a link to them with their own technology. She had just enough information to make it seem possible but each failure started to get frustrating. There were so many benefits to breaking through their defenses, not the least of which might be the chance for diplomacy. I'd love to get into their coms. Even if they don't want to talk to us directly, we might be able to hear them.
Getting through also meant her application would work to delay or even stop the enemies from using their special weapon. To that point, they hadn't seen them try it but then the Gnosis had yet to truly open fire. They were closing in but the drones seemed to be giving them quite the run for their money.
A scan of that technology came back as she expected: they were designed through a similar path as their own work. More Orb knowledge adopted and adapted to fit the culture that the device was found on. Unfortunately, the planet's surface seemed to lack people but there were structures. When they had more time, Cassie hoped to be able to gather more data on them.

What we find down there may well hold the key to understanding what our enemy wants with the Orbs. We can only hope.
Cassie's heart skipped a beat when she broke through the static temporarily, only to be rejected by a large burst that hurt her ear. Wincing, she pulled off the headset and sighed, turning to look at the view screen. The battle outside looked chaotic. Small ships darted about and energy beams went in all directions.
The Gnosis was stepping into quite the mess.
"Open fire, Zach." Desmond's voice rang out over the low din of communication chatter. The pilot nodded once and acknowledged. A moment later, the Gnosis launched an attack, slamming the nearest enemy ship. Energy beams lanced out and connected, striking the rear. Their shields held and Cassie spun in her seat to get a scan.
Their defenses absorbed the energy, more of the fluid shield tech that she and Nathaniel had discussed. This was different than their first encounter. The data proved that they were facing a different classification of vessel, perhaps more combat oriented. Cassie turned to Salina who scowled at her own screen, intensely focused.
"No effect," Salina announced. "Shields are holding firm. If it helps any, they're holding against the drones as well."
"Interesting pick there, Zach," Desmond said. "You found the toughest one."
"And it's coming around," Zach replied. "I think they're preparing to engage."
"Do we have a scan of the weapons on that thing?" Desmond asked.
"Yes, sir," Salina put them up on the screen beside the vessel with amber lines drawn to the different hard points. "As you can see, they have the same type of ordnance we fought back on Earth and as such, our defenses should be able to hold."
"Good, they're not giants, they just have a good wall." Desmond stood. "Alternate fire, Zach. Mass drivers then energy and so forth. Try to confuse those shields and get through. Cassie and Salina, I'm looking for both of you to come up with another solution if the brute force one doesn't work."
"We're on it," Salina replied.

A newfound pressure landed on Cassie's shoulders and she started working faster, trying to remain calm. She had to figure out why the alien security protocols were so different from those they left on Earth. Interference from the destroyed ships played a factor, mostly because the signal strength was diminished.

Maybe if I can boost the signal by a lot. Cassie brought up an inventory of all their surveillance tools. The Gnosis originally planned on charting planets and studying stellar phenomena. That meant satellites and probes, either of which would be able to give her the extra jolt she needed to make her application work.

"Captain," Cassie called out. "Permission to launch both a satellite and a probe. They're going to help me get through all this interference."

"Granted," Desmond said. He was busy at Zach's station. The guns began to fire, and they spoke in hushed voices about the results. On the left side of her console, she prepared her tools to launch while on the right, she looked at the scans on the enemy vessel to see how the attack was going.

The alternation made a small difference. Where their first attack had no effect at all, they were certainly giving the enemy shields a beating. Unfortunately, the results were slow. After five passes, the enemy defenses remained strong at eighty-five percent. Desmond called out to Vincent to redirect the bombers.

"We'll deal with those defensive platforms later, we need to take this guy down." Desmond returned to his seat. "We'll alternate between bombs, beam weapons, mass drivers and missiles."

The enemy returned fire and the ship shook. Salina spoke in her typically calm voice, "Shields holding firm."

Cassie launched the satellite and probe, directing them deep into the heart of the battle. Hopefully, the enemies will consider them to be little more than debris. Neither of the devices were built for combat but they wouldn't really be a threat until they started to broadcast her signal. By the time they started doing so, it would likely be too late to destroy them.

Once she planted her application in their systems, they'd be sending information back to her and the boost wouldn't be necessary. A timer

started, showing it would take just over five minutes for both devices to be in position. She thought about sending two more just in case but hesitated. Additional resources might look like some kind of attack. This has to remain subtle for it to work.

She diverted her attention to the attack, trying not to hold her breath. The fact they were being shot at sunk in. No one on the bridge seemed particularly nervous about it but she knew they were mostly acting. They didn't have time to think about the fight in Earth's orbit but this one, they had ten hours to contemplate.

And everything they were facing, everything they did out there was unknown. Even with their intel and preparation, they were a lone ship so far from home, distance didn't even matter. Pioneers who had to fight for their lives not only against the enemy they anticipated, but an automated one without any remorse or even biologically sentient guidance.

Just do your job and focus on the task at hand. That's how you get through this and remain effective. Cassie took a deep breath and returned to her console, prepping her application to send. The moment the boosting devices activated, she would hit the button for an upload. Until then, she would be patient … and wait.

***

Heat sat in one of three shuttles plunging down toward the surface of the planet. Their escorts weren't considered to be enough for what was going on so a couple deck hands manned the turrets, prepared to take on the drones flying around out there. Scans indicated there were more flying around at the twenty-thousand foot range so they needed to be ready.

Their objective was not directly below the major battle but it was close enough that the shuttles had to skirt the action. They were going for a facility built into the side of a mountain, not unlike Gamma Alpha. Intelligence indicated there were automated defenses as well as drones in the airspace.

Captain Darren Gabriel commanded the mission from the Gnosis but

he sent Lieutenant Colby Topper to lead on the ground. At the briefing, they decided the unit needed more firepower and an officer present in case they lost connection with Gabriel. Not to mention they might make first contact with a reasonable species.

Heat wasn't thrilled with the prospect. The lieutenant was a good man and knew his way around a fight but he was younger, lacking command lead experience. Before he came aboard the Gnosis, he served with Captain Gabriel and rumor had it they were close friends but beyond that, they didn't know much about Colby.

I guess we're about to learn a whole lot about the man. I hope it turns out to all be good.

What made it particularly strange was that Sergeant Major Jose Lopez was left aboard the ship. He was the better choice for leading a bigger mission. They didn't ask Heat for his opinion though so he kept it to himself. Jose didn't seem to mind but then again, he was a consummate professional and wouldn't complain openly.

The shuttle hit orbit and Heat allowed himself to smile. That meant they didn't get attacked while in space. Their power armor would allow them to perform a HALO jump but they had to be close enough for gravity to kick in. Until they reached the planet, the chances of a death they had no control over were high.

While the ship bucked around from the turbulence the others started pumping themselves up. Their weapons were at the ready and they stood in preparation of departing the ship. The two guys in the turrets, more security personnel than marines, would remain with the shuttle in a defensive capacity.

Heat checked his equipment one last time. His HUD showed all systems in the armor were operational and the tie-in to his weapon let him know the battery was fully charged and ready for action. As he focused again on the window, he saw beams burst from the turrets as the drones began their assault.

Patching in to one of the defensive consoles, Heat watched the fight take place from their perspective. The drones were fast as hell and the targeting computer wouldn't even try to pick them up. As the man tried to lead them they danced about in the air, moving erratically.

They seemed more like insects than devices created by sentient life. However, as maneuverable as they were, they didn't have the advantages in atmosphere they did in space. Wind resistance limited them but they still managed to peel off three full volleys on the shuttle. The thing tried to pull up but turbulence slowed it down for just a moment.

The turret tore into the drone's hull and ripped it apart, sending the debris scattering off into the wind.

Another drone nearly rammed the shuttle, getting so close that Heat made an executive decision to bail out. He ordered the marines to line up and disembark immediately. The doors opened and they started jumping. With two left, Heat's eyes widened as he saw a drone come around behind them.

He lifted his weapon and called for those in front of him to get down. Firing, he caught the drone right in the nose and he didn't stop firing until it caught fire. Billowing flames erupted on it and the shuttle pilot moved just before it crashed into them. The drone clipped their side as it went by and Heat hit the deck.

One of the others pulled him to his feet.

"Damage report!" Heat shouted. "How bad is this ship?"

"We'll be able to make it down," the pilot replied. "Especially if the rest of you jump and lighten us up. We're going to need some field repairs to get out of here though."

"You heard the man!" Heat turned to the last two men aboard beside the guys on the turrets. "Bail out. Good luck, pilot. We'll see you when this is over."

Heat jumped out of the ship and noticed that the other shuttles had also deployed their troops. Eleven marines in all went on the mission, a little overkill in Heat's opinion but the importance of the mission dictated the extreme action. As they plunged toward the ground, he noticed the drones were still flying after the shuttles, taking pot shots at them.

The turrets fought back but the shuttle Lieutenant Topper had been on took the full brunt of multiple attacks. The engines caught fire and the pilots ejected along with the turret men. A moment later the ship

exploded. Now we've lost a ride and we've got men to pick up. This just became more complicated.

Their escorts seemed to be busy well above them, still holding off the drones that might've pursued them. They'd been negated quickly as helpful but perhaps they were keeping them alive long enough to get to the surface. Granted, there were fewer drones flying around the planet itself but the shuttles could've used the help.

Heat patched himself in to Lieutenant Topper. "Sir, did you see the shuttle?"

"I did. We were just on that boat a minute ago." Topper paused. "Our escorts got waylaid. We are some ten thousand feet from landfall, Gunnery Sergeant. When we land, we'll establish a perimeter and send out a search and rescue. Shouldn't require more than two men. I'm not reading any activity on the surface. The only action is up here."

Heat was about to respond but had to fire his weapon again, shooting at one of the drones. It flew close enough that the wake caused him to drift dozens of yards away. He caught his target on the side but didn't do any appreciable damage. They weren't attacking the marines anyway. They wanted the shuttles.

They must be programmed for vessels, not something so small as people. Heat checked his altimeter. Nine-thousand feet. For once, he wished he could fall faster. The odd thought made him smirk and he directed his attention down. Their situation may not have been expected but at least they would be able to continue the mission.

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Chapter 7

Nathaniel knew the Gnosis well and he understood what to expect from normal wear and tear. Simulations gave him a general idea of how systems would respond to combat damage but they didn't do justice to the real thing. When the first shots slammed into their shields, there were electrical shorts they didn't anticipate in places that shouldn't have been impacted.

Lights in the recreation area all went down and they lost door control for crew quarters. Nonessential, but troubling that such things happened. He assigned one of the junior technicians to look into it while he focused on the shields. They might not be able to match the way the enemy shields worked but he could manually adjust them as needed.

The first couple hits from the enemy gave him some data to make alterations to the emission frequencies. Nathaniel could make alterations to the hardness of the field, which was intended to block mass drivers. This didn't matter much against their current enemy who seemed to only use beam weapons.

While the hardened field definitely stopped the attacks, it drew more power from the reactors. Loosening up the frequencies from the emitters would prevent damage without taxing the defenses as hard. As he altered the system, he began to understand the liquid concept he and Cassie discussed before.

Reactive defenses meant more than simply automating alterations. It meant absorbing the attacks and responding to their strength. In order to respond quickly enough, the emitters would need to be altering their parameters on the fly. They'd need sensor equipment of their own and the AI to make the right choice.

They were nowhere near such an advancement but while doing the work himself, he began to understand how to make it happen. The next blast hit the ship and brought him sharply back to reality. Everything shook and he held tight to his console to avoid falling out of his chair. Damage report showed they caused minor hull damage

from the concussive force of the attack.
Beam weapons shouldn't have concussive damage. Not the way we understand them. The damaged section was a supply area and no one happened to be there when it was hit. Still, the automated repair systems were already operational in that section but Nathaniel needed to understand what happened.
The fact they took that kind of damage defied his theory about altering the frequencies for energy weapons. Data from the attack showed that just as the beam weapon hit their shields, a secondary blast followed the path of the attack and battered the Gnosis. It seemed to only work if they were able to keep the beam in place for at least a few seconds.
Not much for the pilot to do about that but perhaps if we angled ourselves the moment they attacked, we could mitigate those.
Nathaniel sent his report up to the bridge and continued tweaking the shields. They threw him a curveball and luckily, it didn't cost them too much. He needed to be more cautious going forward, especially with relatively unknown weapons. They might not be so lucky the next time.

***

Desmond nearly fell off his seat when a blast shook the ship. Salina reported minor hull damage and gave a rundown of how the attack worked. Nathaniel's report supported her explanation and gave them all something new to worry about. The ships they fought near Earth did not use such weapons so there was no precedent.
"Zach, do you think you can angle the ship during attacks like that?"
Zach sighed. "I recommend everyone strap in at their stations. We'll be pulling off some heavy maneuvers to do so."
"Okay." Desmond turned to Salina. "Send a ship wide communication that everyone who can should get secure. Those who can't … let them know what to expect. Vincent, do we have a report from the marines or pilots?"
Vincent frowned. "I'm getting a report in now. One of the shuttles is

lost and another took serious damage. There are drones down there. Raptor Squadron is engaged with them. They haven't taken losses but Three and Four have reported damage. Mustang is in the thick of it with the alien flyers. They're also contending with the drones so it's tricky."

"What about the marines themselves?" Desmond asked. "Did we lose anyone with the shuttle? Did the pilots make it?"

"All hands bailed out … but I haven't heard if they all survived." Vincent tapped at his screen. "They should all make landfall within the next minute."

Desmond rubbed his chin. "Cassie, we need to know what's controlling all those drones. Are these platforms solely responsible or could there be something on the surface? If we take out the rest of the platforms up here, do we free our people up from fighting the drones? Can you find out soon?"

"I'm nearly done with the satellite and probe venture," Cassie replied. "I'll start a scan now and compile the data."

"Perfect." Desmond turned back to the screen and narrowed his eyes. The other capital ships were turning their attention away from the platform and moving to engage the Gnosis. Scans indicated their opponents weren't as maneuverable so they might be able to lead them away and keep some distance during the brawl.

We have to buy the marines time to deal with their problems on the surface but more than that, we need to make it safe for us to secure the package. That means all of these ships need to be disabled, destroyed or routed. We need to crank up the pressure and really hit these guys hard.

"Where are we at with the bombers?" Desmond asked. "Are they nearly in position?"

Vincent nodded. "They'll begin their attack run shortly and are coordinating with Zach to ensure their attack syncs up with his. I expect them to deploy shortly."

"We're on it," Zach added. "I'm on com with them now."

Desmond leaned back in his seat. "Then take them out, Lieutenant Commander."

***

Rhino Squadron took from some of the bravest pilots in the entire Earth military. These individuals flew heavy bombers, vehicles loaded with dangerous ordnance that lacked the maneuverability of their smaller fighter counterparts. They were deployed for the destruction of facilities in massive areas or in this case, capital ships with heavy defenses.

Squadron Leader Nolan Caplan headed up the unit with Flight Lieutenant Micah Zane as his second. Charger Squadron, another fighter unit, provided cover for them but they maintained a loose escort. The drones and enemy ships flying around made the going somewhat difficult, even as the larger vessels made their way around the perimeter of the combat zone.

Nolan had been attached to the Gnosis since the project first began. Back then, the bombers were meant to take out debris and massive asteroids. The engineers described the destructive force of their bombs, each one carrying a more immediately destructive yield than the atomic ordnance of the past.

And they left a cleaner footprint so an area wasn't forced to endure lingering radiation for generations.

Rhino had performed bombing runs in simulations hundreds of times. They even fought massive ships but they had never actually dropped a bomb on a live target. The weapons had been tested on debris only and proven quite effective. How would they react to the alien shields? Nolan had a few thoughts.

The worst case scenario involved them having no impact whatsoever and the bombs simply being absorbed by the defenses. This was highly unlikely considering the sheer power being inflicted upon the enemy. However, during the briefing he had been told about the enemy's ability to absorb beam weapons.

It stood to reason they might be able to take even a heavy blow.

The bombs might overload their defense systems, knocking out the shields entirely and allowing the Gnosis to finish the job. Sheer,

overwhelming burst damage may be more than they could take. As they tried to absorb too much at once, the feedback potential could annihilate their generators which led to the best case.

A full volley from Rhino Squadron may well take the ship out entirely. Nolan didn't dare hope for such an overwhelming success. As they rocketed forward, he kept a wary eye on his scanner, ensuring that none of the enemies out in the field decided to attack them. None of their enemies understood their silhouettes yet so they had an advantage. If the aliens knew what Nolan's people represented, they'd redirect forces to intercept.

The bombers were armed with turrets for close protection. AI controlled them but they could be manually engaged from the cockpit. Training simulators saw every pilot work through running and gunning but it wasn't an ideal situation. Evasion maneuvers suffered and sixty percent of the time, the bomber was lost when the pilot had to multitask.

That's why Charger gave them a decent perimeter. Their commander, Squadron Leader Anna Jager, seemed like a reliable soldier. Nolan only met her two days before their maiden voyage but she came highly recommended to the crew. Ultimately, none of them were tested together, not in true combat.

Today, he'd find out if high command's judgement proved sound.

Zach's voice filled the cockpit, "Scans show you're nearly in position."

"Affirmative," Nolan replied. They were going to coordinate their attack, ensuring that the bombs hit just moments after an energy attack from the Gnosis. Mass drivers would follow and another bomber would hit them again. Rhino formed up in a staggered line so they could fire without having to maneuver into a good position.

"Okay, I'll count it off. Mass drivers firing." There was no sound in space but the shells from the Gnosis slammed into the shields, causing blue electricity to dance upon the surface. The enemy shot back, their energy beam connecting on the starboard side of the bow. Zach did what he could to angle the ship but it didn't happen fast enough.

The alien's shot brightened, turning white for just a moment before going dark. "You okay, Gnosis? What the hell was that?"

“We’ll survive,” Zach replied. “I’m going for my next attack. Count thousand one and deploy your first payload.”
“Got it.”
Beams blazed in the darkness of space from the Gnosis, again connecting with the alien shields. A thousand one. Nolan muttered before pulling the trigger. “First bombs away. ETA fifteen seconds.”
He watched as the ordnance rocketed away, their tails flickering purple and gold from thrust.
This could be it. His bombs connected with the enemy, flaring up in an explosive light so bright he winced and had to look away. Scans went offline temporarily. “Gnosis, I’m not getting a good damage read out. What do you have?”
As Nolan spoke, the Gnosis fired again and Micah called out his own deployment of bombs. The ship must’ve weathered the attack then. I guess none of my scenarios happened. They can’t take too much of this punishment. Again, a blinding light filled the combat zone and the enemy returned fire.
More of their ships directed their attention to the Gnosis. Nolan’s scanners came back online and showed fighters incoming. The bombs must’ve seriously grabbed their attention as they risked disengaging with the drones to come after them. Charger squadron rushed to meet them, obviously hoping to keep them occupied long enough to finish the bombing run.
“Damage report coming in,” Zach said. “We’re reading hull damage and engine issues. Fire two bombs each, all of you. I’m going to hit them with everything we’ve got before they take another shot. I’m—”
Com went dead as the enemy fired again, slamming into the same spot they’d hit earlier. Nolan risked a look, noting sparks dancing around a visible hole in the Gnosis hull. Damn it! That looks pretty bad! “You heard him,” Nolan called to Rhino. “Fire immediately.”
Twelve bombs rushed away from their ships, a dozen purple-gold lights challenging the stars in brightness. The first two were taken out by automated defenses, turrets turned to shoot at them. Ten made their mark and Nolan had the peace of mind to look away before they ignited.

The flash went on for a good five seconds before a different color filled the cockpit. Orange-red light erupted from the hull of the enemy capital ship, fiery bits flying away from the damaged port side. The Gnosis opened fire with a continuous barrage of mass driver ordnance. The shells tore through what was left of the alien craft, ripping it in half.

"Rhino, do you read?" Zach's voice came through a great deal of static. "Can you hear me?"

"We're here," Nolan said. "You okay?"

"Damage reports are still coming through," Zach replied, "but the target's eliminated. Redirect and go after the original target. The platform has to go."

"Understood. We're on our way." Nolan checked his scanner, noting that Charger was heavily involved in some pretty nasty dogfights. They were winning their fight but he noted that they had lost one of their number. I didn't even hear the mayday. This damn battle is really hosing our coms!

"Jager, you guys have that or do you need help?"

"We're okay," Jager replied. "You're on the way to the next target, right?"

"Affirmative, we're being redirected to the platform but if you need us …"

"We don't. If you continue your current course, you should be good all the way to the target. You'll have to deal with the drones when you get closer though, so be ready. We'll catch up when we can."

"Thanks, Charger." Nolan sighed. He kicked in his engines and changed course, directing the others to form up on him. The fight wasn't remotely over and they had quite a few objectives to pull off before they could claim victory. Depending on the next several minutes, the battle might be won or utterly lost.

***

Salina rattled off an extensive but not insurmountable damage report. Desmond gritted his teeth as she went through the various systems

that were having problems as a result of two heavy hits from the enemy. He turned to Cassie, drawing a deep breath before he asked his question. He didn't need to be snappy.

"How close are you, Agent?"

Cassie tapped her screen and pressed an earpiece harder against her head. "I'm … I'm in!" She shouted the last word. "I made it! Their security protocols didn't change and I'm able to access their com net."

"Lower their shields and turn off their weapons," Vincent said.

"I can't impact their systems that way but I can use my application to provide the sort of interference required to stop their weapon." She paused. "And I might be able to get coms too. It's working on that now. As far as the other question you had about the drones, the platforms are controlling them. However …"

Desmond sighed. "Yes?"

"There're other automated defenses on the planet's surface and those are controlled by something else … something inside the facility the marines are heading to." Cassie clicked her tongue. "Yes, the power's coming from the place where the Orb is stored."

"Protected, more like," Vincent muttered.

A brilliant flash of light filled the screen, whitening it out. Desmond stood up. "What the hell was that?"

Zach tapped his console and scowled at it. A moment later he let out a cry, throwing a hand over his head. "Contact down! We got him! That capital ship is dust!"

"Confirmed," Salina said in her typical calm tone. "The combination of bombs and alternate fire tore through the shields and finished them off."

"Excellent." Desmond felt a surge of relief fill his chest. "Good job everyone, but they're all converging on us now, right?"

"Four left," Cassie said. "And they're definitely coming fast."

Vincent leaned close. "If they have the same energy pile driver weapon, we might be in trouble, sir."

"Recommendation?"

"Let's fall back and move toward the planet. Give us some distance and lead them on a chase."

“We don’t have the luxury of a prolonged chase.” Desmond rubbed his chin, glaring at the screen. “No, we’re going to attack. Cassie, when this fight starts, I want you to hit them with a burst of interference. Even if they don’t use their weapon, we might be able to disrupt their communications. Messing with their coordination should help.”
“Okay …” Cassie went to work.
“Get ready, Zach. Let them have everything we’ve got.” Desmond looked down at the report. “Give them our Starboard side. Armor’s holding better over there and I don’t want them hitting the fragile side of the hull. Salina, are any systems actually down?”
“No, sir. But there are several decks that aren’t safe to visit right now. Automated repair is still working to get the emergency fields online. Once they are, we can get in there and perform actual repairs.” Salina paused. “Three people are in a serious condition. Other injuries occurred from what happened to the crew quarters.”
Desmond sighed but nodded. “Understood. Engines are still one hundred percent and all weapons are online so we need to finish this up … but without losing so much that we can’t get home. Keep that in mind as we go forward, Zach. Set a course in case we have to pull away in a hurry. I’m willing to take a little risk but I want a back out plan.”

***

Heat watched the ground rapidly approach. They were in mountainous terrain, with sheer rock walls to the north and massive boulders littering the area. He was aiming for something of a clearing, a path that led up the mountain. At some point in the planet’s history, he might’ve been going for a road but the infrastructure was long since consumed by nature.
He ignited his retro rockets, slowing his descent. Five good bursts slowed him considerably but when he landed, he still sunk a good two feet into the dirt. The armor absorbed the impact. Energy blasts flew past his head and he returned fire, shooting at several targets up the path from him.

Are you serious? How? The enemy must've known where he'd land and rushed to meet him. He was hit in the shoulder before rushing to the left, moving toward a particularly large rock for cover. "Contact," he spoke into his com. "At least three targets. I'm under fire and have taken cover. Positions?"

"Coms are linked," Lieutenant Topper replied. "We're a good hundred yards apart. Converge on Sergeant Heathrow's position. Pinch the enemy as we go and we'll advance on the target from there. Confirm."

The rest of the men confirmed the order. Heat's HUD showed the others were on their way but he didn't have the luxury to wait. Moving to the edge of his cover, he aimed his weapon around, using the camera to get his bearings. Three enemies were exposed but he saw beams from at least two more positions.

So five … possibly six. I may not be able to get them all but those jack asses standing up … they're done.

Heat dropped to a knee and leaned out just enough to brace his weapon before firing. He missed his first target and the man tried to get out of the way. Heat quickly redirected and caught the guy in the head, blowing him back several feet. The HUD indicated life signals winked out on the target.

One down.

The rock all around him started chipping away. They began firing directly at his position, tearing through it enough to make him move back from the edge. Some of them shouted in some unknown language, one his men reported hearing when they went to relieve Gamma Alpha.

"I'm in position on the western side," Sergeant Gorman said. "Permission to engage."

"Granted," Topper said. "I'm in position to the east. Open fire."

Supporting fire erupted from behind and either side of Heat. He used his rockets to hop up on the embankment to his left, keeping low. For the half a moment it took to cover the distance, he was exposed and one of the aliens took a pot shot at him. It barely missed, slipping past his leg. As he landed, he crouched behind new cover.

The low rocks between him and the enemy provided reasonable

enough protection and he didn't have to stand fully for a firing solution. Other marines converged on the area, pouring firepower into the alien position. Heat's HUD indicated they were breaking formation and dashing behind rocks.

Heat popped up and took aim, catching one of them in the back as he ran. The shield flared and saved his life, giving him a chance to dive to the left behind cover. Topper accessed their computers, marking various targets. The small squares represented the aliens and the large triangle indicated their destination.

No automated defenses yet. Perfect.

"Search and destroy," Topper said. "Kelly and Dorian, get angles and take point. We're taking these pricks down. Anderson and Vine, you're on rescue for the downed pilots. Sergeant Heathrow, I want you, Gillet and Gorman to move ahead and check on the facility. Get me some recon. Defenses, aliens and anything else of value. Camera shots and scans. Copy?"

"Copy, Lieutenant." Heat motioned for his men to follow him. "You heard the man. Let's make this happen."

Wreckage from the destroyed shuttle was nearly six kilometers away. The pilots popped transponders so the marines wouldn't have a hard time finding them. Luckily, the enemy was too occupied with their own activity to bother hunting down a couple of downed humans. If Topper's force didn't keep them pinned down, they might try to take the opportunity.

The mainstay of the marine force moved off while Heat and his men headed west. "We'll go roundabout to remain clear of the battle. Avoid engagement. Follow my mark."

They engaged their rockets, hopping over the uneven terrain and making good time. Weapons began firing to the east as the marines engaged the aliens. A small screen to the left of Heat's HUD showed the action. The battle took place near what appeared to be a landed shuttle. The enemy likely hoped to use it for support against the power armor.

When their turret lit up and started carving massive pieces of rock, the ploy worked and the marines were forced to temporarily withdraw.

Even with their weapons and maneuverability, they didn't stand a chance against ship ordnance. Topper called for air support but Raptor reported the drones made an approach especially difficult.
They would have to turn to their own heavy ordnance, including small rockets and grenades. The good news was if the aliens were busy fighting the marines, they didn't have the opportunity to break into the facility to steal the Orb. Heat and his crew could grab their intel in peace. He planned on making the suggestion they go ahead and secure the device.
Providing they didn't encounter indigenous defense.
They cleared a rise and saw the facility for just a moment. A wide courtyard was covered by a rockslide and dust obscured all but the tallest structure. Sunlight gleamed off the exposed metal of the walls and a two story doorway sat atop a flight of destroyed stairs. They landed and crawled up to the top of the next hill, granting them a decent view of the area.
Heat's scans found several gun emplacements, all live and active. They'd recently fired as well and he caught sight of a dead alien body near the base of the stairs. "Looks like they tried to make a straight run for it just to see what would happen." There was a strong energy reading coming from inside and four turrets total. Each one had two barrels and were motionless.
"Tough approach," Gillet said. "Even from the rear, you'd be exposed for a good five seconds before you'd have any cover. And those doors. How're we going to get those open?"
"Help from the Gnosis," Heat replied. "I believe we've got a certified Orb genius aboard. We can put them to work."
Gorman gestured off to the left. "Sir, I've got movement over there. Looks like mobile defenses. Definitely not the aliens we've been fighting."
Heat saw it as well though it was obscured by a wall of rocks. It moved slow and deliberate, easily navigating the difficult terrain. He initiated a scan and identified it as a treaded vehicle following a set path. It turned and moved directly in front of the ruined stairs, giving them a good look at it.

It was roughly eight feet tall and ten feet long. Wheels were surrounded in aged, cracking treads which chewed up the dust and rocks but wouldn't last too much longer. Two gun barrels started near the back and hung over the front, putting them at probably eight feet each. A canister sat near the back, probably for missiles but it appeared to be empty.

The tank turned as it finished its pass in front of the building and disappeared behind the rocks. Though the marines and aliens were causing some real carnage not even two hundred yards away, this thing didn't seem to care. Its programming must've required someone to attack the structure to become activated.

"Probably won't be a problem with all of us," Heat noted. "It hasn't rearmed in a long time."

"Must be solar powered." Gorman gestured to the facility. "This place has been out of commission for a long time."

Heat checked his HUD to see how the battle was going. From the lieutenant's perspective, they were trying to get a good position to take care of the shuttle. Private Wheeler took some heavy damage to his armor and had to fall back. Private Bosh might've been dead. He hadn't replied to coms and his armor's sensors malfunctioned.

"I'm scoping a turret." Gorman interrupted his thoughts. "Two of them in fact. On either side of those big doors."

Heat squinted to see what he did and finally noticed the two boxes and something else: bodies. There were at least five alien bodies lying in the dirt nearby. A quick scan confirmed they were dead and that Gorman was correct in his assessment. "Good catch. They must still work. Do you see the corpses?"

"Wow … They went for it." Gillet shook his head. "But did the turrets do them in? Or that tank thing? How would they have gotten past it?"

"Maybe it's malfunctioning," Gorman suggested. "God knows how long it's been here … and how it's all screwed up."

"Sergeant Heathrow," Topper's voice crackled in his ear. "We need some support with this shuttle. Can you get here in a hurry?"

"We're on our way." Heat gestured with his head. "Follow me."

They had a good half mile to cover to get to the alien's position. Each

man kicked in their rockets, hopping toward the destination. As they moved, Heat wondered about the single shuttle they were contending with. Unless the drones took down others, he didn't think the aliens would only send one. There must be more out there.

It didn't matter just then. The site came into view and at the apex of a bounce, he took a shot at the shuttle. His blast connected with the top but didn't cause any appreciable damage. As for the next one, they were close enough to see other targets. Aliens held up in solid cover they'd erected with some kind of stationary shields.

"Take those guys out," Heat said, firing the first shots. He connected with his target, a perfect headshot. Personal shields didn't stop that blow and the body hit the ground, unmoving. His men began firing, tearing into their ranks. Their moment of surprise allowed them to take down four enemies before they could react.

That's when Heat got an accurate count of their opposition.

Even with quite a few already killed from the battle, his scans indicated there were thirty more aliens to contend with. This was after the marines had fired rockets and used grenades on them and it didn't count the turret on the shuttle tearing through the rocky cover. Heat's computer stated that a direct hit from the cannon would be fatal.

Not a big surprise. It's meant to take down fighters.

They landed in cover with their opponents hardly forty yards away on the other side. Shouts in their strange language could be heard echoing off the cliffs. Off in the distance, they heard the boom of a ship's engines. Heat wondered if it might be their own air support or if the aliens finally got some assistance.

Anyone willing to fly around up there with those drones is insane or amazing. Heat risked a glance up but didn't see anything immediately. That didn't mean they weren't out there, flying their patrols with the patience of machines. The people who lived on that planet must've learned a lot about renewable energy to keep them aloft for so long and have them start out with enough of a jolt to gather additional sun.

"We're in position," Heat announced to Topper. "Four down … but it looks like we've got thirty to go."

"We're at a stalemate for a moment," Topper replied. "What did you

learn about the facility?"
Heat filled him in on the doors, the bodies, turrets and tank. "It'll be a tough approach but we can manage. Providing we're not being shot in the back by these idiots."
"Understood. I'm still trying to get us some air support."
The ground shook from an explosion, some kind of frag grenade going off not even ten feet beyond their cover. Heat frowned. If the aliens were able to take out their cover, the fight would get chaotic fast. He took a quick scan of the topography, marking their next destination in case they needed to move. Gillet and Gorman confirmed.
Vine pinged them all. They found the downed pilots and were securing the area for evac. The men weren't in a good position to move so they were staying put. Topper confirmed their report but it was obvious he wasn't happy. The current fight needed everyone they could get. The other shuttle had landed safely but takeoff would be a nightmare.
Going through the drones a second time seemed suicidal, even if they flew low to help out.
Vine continued, "Scan data from the pilots confirms four alien landing zones for a total of five shuttles down here somewhere. Two are damaged and cannot fly but the other three should be able to take off. However, they're honestly just as stuck as we are with the drones."
"Thank you," Topper said. "I guess we can be grateful they're spread out. I'm done playing with these guys. Let's alternate attacks on that shuttle until we take it out. I've got visual. I'll call when the weapon is facing away from your position so you can attack without risking that cannon. Everyone sound off when you're ready."
This is going to be rough.

***

Cassie rubbed her eyes after staring at the screen for nearly five minutes without blinking. Her application operated on the alien's coding methodology so it should've been difficult to detect. After initiating the interference to disrupt their communication network,

she kept a sharp eye on the application's logs for any signs of discovery.

Depending on their computer specialist's arrogance, they will either figure it out fast or not at all. They had a lot of time to study us before attacking Earth and we only had four days. Now I find out how good of students both sides of this conflict are.

The fact they broke into two forces instead of ensuring a victory on Earth gave her hope. They underestimated opponents. While they certainly believed the Gnosis to be a threat when they attacked Gamma Alpha, they didn't believe the defenses on the planet could hold them so long. Their tactics showed an impatient, raider like mentality.

They probably shouldn't have attacked this planet the way they did either but the brute force approach was working, albeit slowly. Whatever they hoped to gain from the Orbs must've been worth the expense of lives and equipment. What did they hope to gain? If only the prisoner wouldn't have died, they might've found these answers. Piecing them together from what was happening at this new planet would be much more difficult. Depending on what they found when they took the Orb. Based on the reports from the surface, Cassie began to wonder whether or not anyone would be walking away with the prize. They weren't only dealing with the drones but other robotic opponents as well.

If Cassie had more time to study the drones, she might've been able to disrupt their signal as well but as she probed the signals coming from the platform, she found yet another deviation of the coding principles from the Orb. Everyone interpreted them differently enough to make them not immediately compatible but there were similarities.

Some of her colleagues had discussed the idea of there being a universal language in the Orb, a standardized computer practice far beyond their understanding. Even after countless hours and years of study, experts agreed they'd only barely delved beneath the surface. The prospect of securing a second Orb provided them with hope of speeding up their understanding.

Were they meant to be combined? Cassie began working on a theory

that maybe they were all linked up through some kind of interstellar network. The prospect seemed impossible by their current standards but whatever species built the devices were clearly advanced far beyond anyone else in the galaxy.

She twitched when she heard something over her earpiece, something that she thought might be a voice. Boosting the gain and trying to clean up the signal, she heard additional syllables. More talk. The alien's language! Their com network, though diminished, was still functioning and she had tapped in.

"Captain!" Cassie cried out, engaging the translator she planned to use on the prisoner. "I've got their coms! They're weak but they're coming through!"

"Good job," Desmond replied. "Tell us what they're saying as soon as you know."

"Their formation is loosening up," Zach said. "But I'm picking up an energy surge and they're about in range."

"Beat them to the punch," Desmond replied. "Fire when ready."

Cassie went back to her application, recording the enemy com chatter and pumping it through the translator. A meter appeared showing how long it would take to finish the process. Tapping her foot impatiently, she directed her attention to the drones, noting they did not pursue the enemy beyond the orbit of the planet.

The automated defenses engaged the various fighters still flying around but they weren't leaving their perimeter. Perhaps they have a specific range from their platform before giving out? I hope there's something to study when we're done. All of this could be huge for our advancement but for now, we have to survive four to one odds.

Cassie sighed. I did not need to think about that just now.

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Chapter 8

Dennis Arden performed a flip, gritting his teeth from the pressure the maneuver applied to his body. The enemy fighter on his tail nearly collided with a drone and had to pull their own wild move to avoid it. Without a firing solution, his opponent went low and banked, trying to get back on his six.

The squadron leader climbed and gunned the throttle, heading straight for one of the capital ships that was moving away from the planet. His wingman told him to jog starboard just before firing a barrage at one of the enemy ships. A flash lit up the space behind Dennis and his scan indicated he was clear of the attack.

"Thanks," Dennis said. "I couldn't shake him."

"A drone took mine out," Shane replied. "Corey's down."

Corey Parks, Mustang Six, had lost his fighter. Dennis saw he'd ejected but with those small crafts flying around, he may well have been killed. They wouldn't know until the battle ended and considering what was going on out there, it didn't look like it was slowing down. The Gnosis took out the biggest of the capital ships but there were four more.

And their victory required quite the concerted effort. The bomber squadron was now on its way to the platform supposedly controlling the drones. If they could stop those things from causing trouble, the fight would simplify considerably. Dennis took several volleys from the little bastards and though they didn't have the power to take him out, they did some damage.

His left engine glitched out twice but seemed to be back on track and one of his stabilizers nearly got him killed when it didn't react instantly to a maneuver he needed. Luckily, his wingman had his back though he had to save Shane twice as well. Once from two drones attempting to ram him and another time from an enemy missile that nearly caught his tail.

They were able to shoot down the projectile ordnance so far but it was a risky trick to rely on. Dennis hoped Raptor would be able to join

them but they were too heavily engaged with the orbital defenses that harassed the marine shuttles on their way down. They'd lost two ships during the fight and at least one of their pilots was confirmed dead. Charger escorted the bombers so they weren't able to come to their aid either. If anyone doubted the superior talent of human pilots, they wouldn't after reading the after-action report from this conflict. Eighteen ships were more than holding their own against an overwhelming force. Academy pilots would likely study the battle for years to come.

If anyone was still alive to talk about it.

Dennis felt a surge of hope for a moment when his scanner brought back a lowball number of drones. Less than twenty-five left. Unfortunately, the platform deployed another fifteen before he could even mention their good fortune to the rest of his unit. Couple that with the fact they still faced eighteen alien ships and they were in a rough spot.

This is the fight that never ends!

Charger reported heavy combat and Dennis frowned at the scan data coming through. Two of their ships received heavy damage and a third reported a random malfunction not related to the fight at all. Their targeting computer went down completely and they were on dumb fire mode for as long as they remained.

Automated repair didn't detect a problem so there was no fixing it mid-mission.

The Gnosis fell back from the major battle and brought the capital ships with it. This helped the fighters to not worry about turrets from the larger ships but it meant support was all that much further away. Dennis plotted a course back to them and noted it would take ten minutes at full throttle to catch up.

We're on our own for a while.

Two enemy ships disengaged from their drones and headed off toward Charger and the bombers. Dennis directed Shane to them and they altered course to follow, dodging drone fire and the debris of other ships along the way. Their path took them through some of the wildest fighting in the combat zone and even with evasive maneuvers,

they took a small beating.
Shields were down to fifty percent when they broke from the swarm of drones and they were close enough to see the heat coronas of the fighters they were after. “Charger,” Dennis said, “we’re coming up on your position in pursuit of two targets. Please be advised not to shoot us. We’ll be there momentarily.”
“Understood,” Jager replied. “We’ve got you on scans. Thanks for the assist. We’re almost to our destination.”
“Copy that.” Dennis engaged his targeting computer and let it try to get tone but it continued to go for something to the left. He told it what ship to aim for but it ignored him. Damn it, mine too? The glitch seemed isolated but to experience it on another ship made him suspicious. Was the enemy doing something or did they have a systemic problem?
He informed Shane of what was going on.
“What the hell?” Shane sighed. “Looks like Hal’s reporting the same problem.”
“It might end up happening to everyone if we’re out here long enough.” Dennis switched to guns and used his reticle. He had a firing solution so pulled the trigger. Chunks of metal dashed away from him but only a couple hit the enemy ship. I need to get closer. He increased throttle, his body pressed tightly into his chair.
“Mustang One this is Charger One,” Jager’s voice sounded strained. “Please refrain from guns. You are flying directly into our path right now.”
“Affirmative and sorry about that.” He switched back to energy weapons and redirected his course, moving so he’d be firing at an angle away from his allies. Shane did the same, lighting up his target with several beam weapon attacks. The shields flared and the ship veered off. They stuck with the last one.
Dennis fired again, this time scoring a shot. His opponent flipped on a dime and came flying straight for him. He had to dive to avoid a collision and his computer screamed out an alarm for proximity. The brief moment passed and his heart raced as the enemy tried to get a solution on him.

Banking hard to the left, he came around and they played chicken once more, this time with gunfire preceding them. The enemy's beam weapon slammed into his shields, making the fighter shake but he scored a direct hit as well. Combined with his first assault, his target's shields dropped and something orange started spilling from the right side.

The fighter headed off toward the capital ships when they saw the pilot eject. A moment later, the ship exploded in a spectacular fashion. His buddy was nowhere to be seen. He'd bugged out completely but that didn't mean there weren't additional targets. Charger was facing some heavy resistance still and since they were already there, Dennis and Shane jumped in.

Drones swarmed the area, putting them into a defense hell of crazy maneuvers and desperate shots. "We'll fill in with you guys," Dennis spoke to Charger. "Hopefully, we can get those damn bombers in position and get rid of these drones. There are fewer of the aliens now than us so they're going to redirect their efforts."

"Not for long," Nolan Coplan said. "We're thirty seconds from our deployment. In a few minutes, I'm hoping to see a whole lot of drones floating around out here with no further guidance. Stay tuned, folks. There's about to be a really big boom."

***

"Enemies are opening fire," Salina announced, still eternally calm. "Concentrated fire."

"Evasive!" Desmond gestured at Zach. The pilot slapped the controls and a half moment later, the ship jerked hard during the maneuver, nearly tossing people from their seats. A tiny shimmer indicated a shield graze but the beams seemed to fly right by. "Damage report. What happened?"

"Reports of minor injuries," Salina said. "Automated repair seems to have dropped offline when we pulled that maneuver but I'm rebooting it now. Should be back shortly. Other than that, we're good."

Desmond nodded. "Great work, Zach but we're going to have a lot

more of that. Open fire, everything we've got."
Zach initiated an attack sequence, firing all their weapons at once. All at once, some of the lights dimmed temporarily and Desmond glanced back at Salina for an explanation. She held her hand up to buy a moment as she checked but meanwhile, the attacks found their mark, slamming into one of the smaller vessels.
Cassie took over for Salina, "Direct hit from the mass drivers, energy weapons and at least two of the missiles. It appears their automated defenses took down the rest of the volley. Their shields are … at … wow, thirty percent. They've experienced some hull damage from concussion. I estimate another solid hit like that would disable them at the very least."
"Gotta move," Zach grunted, working the controls like a concert pianist. The ship once again jostled the crew as it bolted to the side. This time, they didn't evade all the attacks and the ship shook violently from another blow. "Damn it!"
"It's okay," Desmond said. "Focus and return fire. Take that ship out."
"Minor damage in the hangar," Salina said. "Medical is reporting more injuries. The lights dimmed earlier due to the way we're manually regulating power to enhance the shields. If Nathaniel wasn't massaging them, that last hit might've caused more damage. In fact, it would've likely impacted our maneuvering thrusters."
"I'll be sure to thank him later," Desmond replied. He clenched his fists as Zach fired again, another full volley of everything they had. The lights didn't dim this time but he heard a strange zap to his left, like an electrical spark going off. "Did you hear that, Salina?"
Salina tapped her computer and grunted in annoyance. "Navigation circuit was overloaded but it's already switched to the secondary backup. I'm routing repair to the primary. Tertiary is still operational as well but I'd rather not rely on only one additional backup considering it's the only thing keeping us mobile."
"Direct hits," Cassie announced. "Shields have dropped … engines are no longer operational. That ship is done!"
"Initiate thrusters," Desmond said. "Full speed. Make us a moving target." He turned to his own screen and looked over the environment.

The planet was nearby and a single natural satellite orbited it nearby. Rocky debris hugged the moon, acting as a curtain. More than a hundred tiny asteroids remained close together, a tight group held firm by gravity.

“We are at full speed,” Zach reported.

Desmond hummed. He remembered something from the academy about targeting computers. They were fairly accurate and made combat a lot easier for the most part but they could get confused. Pilots flying smaller ships needed to take some manual control to pick their targets when more than one presented itself.

If they shared technology with the aliens, then there was a good chance they had similar limitations. The next decision he made might be the most dangerous but it would afford them a little breathing room in the fight with three other ships. Somehow, they had to even the odds without exchanging blows.

That wouldn’t work out long term.

“Set a course for their moon,” Desmond said. “Get us as close to those rocks as you can.”

“Sir?” Zach said. “Those things are pretty close together. They look small from here but according to my scans, they range in size from our fighters all the way up to a scout … vessel … ah …”

Desmond smirked. “Very good. I’m glad you worked that one out.”

The ship shook from another blow to the rear. “Set course and get us there fast, if you please. We’re slugging it out right now but that’s not sustainable. We have to tip the odds somehow and giving them more things to shoot at seems like a pretty good idea.”

***

Heat prepared himself to take his shots at the shuttle, waiting for the word to go. The cannon annihilated a boulder nearby, shards of stone flying in every direction. Topper called out for his team to go and the three of them popped up, firing their weapons into the stationary space craft.

Shields began to glow, absorbing the weapon’s fire. Those are meant

for ship to ship combat. There's no way we're getting through those with personal gear.
"Incoming!" Gillet shouted, gesturing behind him. Drones swooped in, strafing the ground around them before they could even move. High-pitched, rapid-fire blasts cut echoed off the rocks and distant cliffs. They didn't stop with the marines, sweeping over the shuttle as well.
"What the hell? Why'd they suddenly decide to come after us?"
"We must be a credible threat now," Heat said. He got on the com. "Lieutenant, I recommend we fall back toward the facility and let these guys deal with the drones."
The cannon went off again and the drones came around for another attack. Heat and his men had to give up their position as their cover was trashed. They made a low hop to the next embankment and away from the attack. Coms filled with static for a moment and when they came back, shouting filled his ears.
"Cut the chatter!" Heat shouted. It took a second time to get them to calm down. That's when he noticed what had happened. Lieutenant Topper's life sign was negative. His last position put him in the vicinity of the last turret strike. Private Wheeler was with him and had also been cut down.
God damn it! "Listen up. I'm marking a rally point and I want everyone to make their way their now. Go!"
Heat marked an area between the shuttle and the facility. He wanted to remove the threat of the aliens before dealing with the automated defenses but that didn't seem practical. Besides, the drones were giving them cover now. They could focus on the primary mission and ignore the enemy.
It would've been better to just watch our backs and go forward. The Lieutenant got greedy attacking that shuttle. He wouldn't voice the thought but it might come out eventually anyway. The post-op briefing would definitely delve into the decisions made on the mission and considering they had already lost two men, one an officer, meant scrutiny.
The men arrived within a few moments and they were clearly rattled. Heat needed to get them back on track and focused on an achievable

task. “We’re going for the facility,” he said. “This is what to expect: a small technical and two turrets. The vehicle has beam weapons but the missile canisters are empty. The emplacements are still active.”
“What then?” Gillet asked. “Even if we take them all out, how’re we getting through the doors? And what if those drones come back?”
“They’re fast but our weapons can down them. I shot one when we were still on the shuttle.” Heat pointed at three men. “Dorian, Kelly and Bosh, you’re on air detail. The rest of you will on the lookout for alien interference while we try to get in the door. Those bastards are locked down by the drones right now but they won’t be for long. Any other questions?”
No one spoke up. “Good, time’s running short. By twos, get to the site. I’ll take lead with Gorman. The rest of you follow and spread out. We’re not taking any more casualties from splash damage shit. Now move!”
Heat initiated the first jump and headed back toward the facility. They were there in five boosts, back to the cover they took while gathering intel. The tank was on the far left behind a wall of cracked rock. Both turrets were closed up and the sound of battle back at the shuttle echoed eerily around them.
“Alright, tank first,” Heat said. “Gorman, let’s take down that wall and see if we can’t give ourselves a little terrain advantage. Ready? Fire!”
They both took aim and blasted the rocks, aiming low. Dust exploded into the air as the top tumbled down. Some of the heavier boulders danced off the surface of the tank, clanging noisily. The cannons fired, blasting the offending stones while moving swiftly to avoid being buried.
While the thing survived the assault, it didn’t come away unscathed. Massive dents occupied the top and the canisters that likely held missiles were totally crushed. It moved swiftly though, barrels swiveling on a turret as it scanned for enemies. The AI must’ve understood what such an attack meant and so it tried to locate a threat.
“Anyone with rockets left, give those treads a good blast!” Heat gestured. He used his targeting computer to get a lock and fired three

of his own. They slammed home along with several others, dislodging one of the wheels. The vehicle stopped there but it turned in their direction and opened fire.

None of the marines were close enough together to give the vehicle a good target and as they sprung into action, they were able to keep moving fast enough to avoid the shots. Hopping from cover to cover, they kept out of its range while returning fire. Heat was about to give another order when someone leaped from the rocket and sailed straight for their target.

Gillet dropped two grenades on the target and fired straight down before he cleared it. When he hit the ground, he rolled, coming to a halt beside a boulder and out of sight of his unit. The grenades exploded, sending the tank five feet into the air. When it came down it landed on its side and teetered for several seconds before flopping over onto its roof.

A fire burned on the bottom and though the turret managed another shot, something blew within it. The debris went in every direction and a chunk of metal embedded itself a good six inches into a rock only feet from Heat's head. It might've had enough velocity to go through his armor but he didn't really want to think about it too much.

"Report," he called out. "Is everyone okay?"

"I'm good," Gillet said, waving from his position. Heat planned on having a talk with him later in private about the foolhardy maneuver but just then wasn't the time. Bosh was the only one who didn't immediately reply.

They found him lying down, life signs steady but he'd taken a shot to the leg. His armor was scorched but still attacked. "You're lucky you didn't lose that limb," Gorman said. "Can you walk?"

"My armor seems to be frozen up, sir." Bosh shook his head. "I'm trying to get the joints undone without getting out of the suit."

"Stay in there no matter what," Heat said. "The atmosphere here says it's okay but I'm not taking any risks." He got Vine on the com. "You guys okay?"

"Package still secure. We've got the shuttle and the men are all aboard. Do you need us over there?"

Heat considered it for several moments. It would be nice to get the shuttle in place quickly but the drones made it impossible. They'd have to cross the bridge of moving the Orb when they came to it. "No, stay where you're at. We're trying to infiltrate the facility now and when we're done, we'll need evac. Start thinking about how that'll work."

"Understood, sir. We're on standby."

Heat raised the Gnosis. He needed to give them the briefest update before proceeding with the mission. He was surprised when Commander Bowman's voice piped on the line. They're serious about this if he's in charge of the field op. "Commander, this is Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow reporting in."

"What've you got?" Vincent asked.

"Lieutenant Topper is KIA. We are proceeding on the mission. I've assumed command."

Vincent sighed. "Understood. Let me know if you need anything. How close are you to the objective?"

"There're only a few more obstacles to clear but we're almost there."

"Alright, soldier. I'll wait to hear from you. Bowman out."

Heat turned to the others. "Gillet, get Bosh out of the line of fire. As soon as he's in cover, let's pound those turrets and make sure they never open up again." He waited for his man to be clear of the combat zone then marked the targets, giving each man a designation through their HUDs. A green light in their helmets indicated it was time to shoot and they let loose.

Both turrets popped up the moment they took damage, spinning wildly to find a target. The marines attacked at enough distance that it bought them some time before the emplacements were able to zero in on their attackers. By the time they took aim, it was too late for them. The left gun went first, fire bursting out of it like a cheap firework before the gun slumped in its encasement. The other one fired several shots, seemingly at random. Heat guessed they took out its targeting module. They all directed their fire and it slumped backward, hanging by a couple of wires.

"Scanning," Gillet said. "I'm not picking up any additional weapons

here."
"Let's move." Heat led the way, walking instead of using the jump packs. He took the stairs three at a time, allowing his gun to lead the way. The sounds of battle continued in the direction of the shuttle, giving him some confidence that they still had a while to go before they would be attacked again.
They arrived at the turrets, checking them over to ensure they were truly destroyed. Both of them were smoking and one was in pieces. They'd done their due diligence in that regard. Heat had them bring Bosh over and helped him to sit up in some decent cover. Once he was secure, they turned their attention to the doors.
The monolithic entry towered over them with a panel on the left sticking out of the otherwise smooth surface. Heat and Gorman approached, looking it over. A number of lights flashed over the surface of what looked to be an input device and the wall itself was a screen with various characters spread across it.
Gorman spoke up. "This panel's been used recently. Look at the dust around the edges and how it's clean in the middle here and here."
"They probably tried it before the turrets tore them up," Gillet said. He gestured to the bodies. "These guys were too close to the weapons to get away easily. It would make sense."
"Doesn't matter one way or another," Heat replied. "Can you get us in, Gorman or do you need help from the ship?"
Gorman hesitated to respond, standing before the panel for a good twenty seconds. He finally shrugged. "I've run a scan but yes, I think I'll need some help. I'll get a line to the Gnosis right now. Watch my back, huh?"
"You heard him," Heat said. "We've got aliens and drones still out here. Spread out and take up positions. We're not quite done so don't relax just yet. I anticipate at least one more rush before we get in that door and God knows what happens when we're through. I'm not able to scan the interior of this facility so it'll be exciting."
"Yeah," Kelly said, "this trip has been so boring already, am I right?"
Some of the men chuckled, probably a much needed moment considering all they'd been through. Heat smirked as well, turning his

attention outward. When the attack came, he wanted to be ready and he didn't have to wait. The moment Gorman touched the panel, they heard a high-pitch sound in the air: more of the drones.
"Alright," Heat shouted. "Looks like the first fight comes from above. Aim high folks and get your asses ready. These things may not pack a hard punch right away but they shoot quick and there's plenty of them." A dozen black dots appeared over a rise, flying swiftly in their direction.
Well, shit. Heat dropped to a knee and took aim.

***

Cassie's station had two screens and she dedicated one of them to reports of the action going on outside. Mostly, she was concerned with how the Gnosis was doing. Their maneuver to get near the moon kept them moving fast enough to make them a difficult target and though the enemy had fired several times, they continued to miss.
Small favor there!
However, they'd be slowing down as they drew closer to all the rocks. Flying around those asteroids would likely be the most profound test of Zach's skills he had ever experienced. Cassie ran a private simulation and discovered that the medium sized chunk of debris would be enough to easily penetrate their hull and if it hit too hard, it could go right through shields.
"Banking," Zach said. "This will let us slide in near the moon and allow us to have forward facing fire on the enemies."
He's flying in backwards!? Cassie bit her tongue. The man spoke like he'd done it a million times and he sounded confident. No one else said anything so either they trusted him completely or they didn't know exactly what to say about it. Regardless, if it worked, she planned on buying him a drink … and possibly a fruit basket.
Salina broke through her thoughts, announcing to the bridge, "I've mapped the paths of the different asteroids. They're in your console, Zach."
"Thank you," Zach muttered. "Yep, I'm matching speed of the biggest

one … and we're … about … there." The ship shook for a brief moment. "That was us skimming orbit. The moon's not that big but it's still got some pull. We're now moving amongst the rocks and I'll have to adjust speed in … two minutes … to avoid being hit."
"Excellent," Desmond said. "Distance to targets?"
"They're closing," Salina replied. "They'll have a firing solution …" A blast erupted on the screen and narrowly missed them. "Now."
"Uh huh." Desmond shook his head. "Return fire, Zach. We should have the advantage now when it comes to targeting so hit them with everything you've got."
A communication came through on Cassie's terminal and she leaned toward her screen, boosting the gain. The enemy signal still ran strong and her translation device wasn't quite finished but this wasn't them. It came from the planet's surface. It took her a moment to clean it up and even when she did, static surrounded the words.
"This is Sergeant Gorman, requesting assistance. Do you read?"
"I read," Cassie replied. "This is Agent Alexander. What can I do to help? Do you need reinforcements?"
"Negative, I am at the facility which we believe to house this planet's Orb. I'm at a panel and I do not know how to get through. To make matters more complicated, we are under attack down here by drones. Can you assist?"
"Yes!" Cassie paused as the enemy's communications went silent. The feedback on her application indicated that they hadn't discovered it but something had gone wrong. It sent back messages suggesting they were no longer transmitting. A paranoid thought took her and she checked to see if the aliens had found a way into their systems. Their network appeared to be clean and Cassie believed she knew what to look for. Of course, if I don't, there's not much I can do about it. She turned to the satellite she'd deployed and connected up to it, boosting her signal so she could help the marines. While it established a connection, she turned in her seat.
"Captain," Cassie began, "I've got some news."
"Go ahead."
"The marines have made contact with me. They are at the door to the

facility and are requesting assistance getting in. I'm establishing a connection now. However, they are under assault by drones."
"Okay, that's partially great. It'll help when the bombers take out that platform." Desmond paused. "Was there something else?"
"Um … yes, I seem to have lost connection with the aliens. I was translating their communications but it suddenly went dark. I don't think they discovered it but to be honest, that's the only logical explanation."
Desmond sighed. "Understood."
"Direct hit!" Zach shouted. "I think their shields held though."
"They've taken out several of the rocks," Salina announced. "I'm recalculating the courses now … um …"
The ship shook violently and Cassie had to grab her console tightly to stay in her seat.
"What the hell was that?" Desmond asked.
"One of the rocks was sent off course by an alien attack," Zach replied. "It was moving fast. Shields held in that section. I'm altering our course and firing again. I might be able to finish this guy off in two more volleys but he's wily as hell. My first attack hit him hard but they're starting to throw themselves around out there. The ride for the crew must be terrible."
Cassie established a connection with the marine's computer and saw through his helmet on her secondary screen. There was a three second delay, which frustrated her. If only she'd deployed the satellite closer to the planet but that hadn't been its purpose. She needed it only to boost her ability to get the application sent to the ships.
"Okay, Sergeant. I'm seeing what you're seeing and running a scan." Cassie paused. "Tap the left hand corner twice. Note that we're on a small delay so wait for my response before doing anything else."
On the screen, she saw blasts hit the wall a few feet from Gorman. To his credit, he didn't even move let alone jerk around. That level of courage under fire came from nerves of steel. She put herself in his shoes and doubted she would've been so calm. The Gnosis crew sincerely impressed her.
"It's done," Gorman said. His voice transfer didn't seem to be

experiencing a delay, which made it easier to offer support. “The screen’s lit up.”
A few moments later, Cassie saw what he described. The screen came online with text all over it. She turned to start her translator but paused, frowning at what she saw. Their opponents had got their first and already bypassed the security. Unless the inhabitants of that world used the exact same alphabet.
Cassie ran the already built text translator and smirked. They had gotten through and the application remained on the console. It was set to open the doors again in nine minutes and forty seconds. However, they did have an override. “Hit the bottom left of the panel then swipe to the right. When you’re done, tap the upper right and hold it.”
“Yes, ma’am.”
“Another hit,” Zach said. “Whoa! They’re really returning fire now! And …” Another hit on the ship made the lights flicker overhead.
“One hit out of well over a dozen. However, many of the rocks around us have been destroyed.”
“I’ve got the path for another group,” Salina said. “Sent you the coordinates.”
“We’re on our way.”
“When will these open, ma’am?” Gorman asked.
Cassie didn’t have an answer but she knew they’d initiated the same sequence the aliens did. “I’m … not entirely sure. But that’s how they did it. I’m sorry I can’t be more specific. However, you don’t have to stay at the console anymore. You can get some cover and fight back until they open.”
“Roger that,” Gorman replied. “Thank you for the assist.”
“They’re almost through,” Cassie said. “But the drones must be dealt with. It’s getting hairy down there.”
“Vincent, follow up with Rhino,” Desmond said. Another blast took out one of the asteroids nearby. “Zach … our advantage is dwindling.”
“I’m working on it, sir.”
“Work harder. We have to even the odds before leaving this moon’s orbit or we won’t stand a chance.”

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Chapter 9

Heat fired several shots before jumping out of the path of an incoming drone. It strafed the area he was just standing in, causing great plumes of dust and rock to dance in the air. He spun in place as he landed, firing at it as it banked to the right and moved for another attack vector. He missed and didn't have time to shoot again before the next ship came at him.

"Hey," Gorman's voice came over the com, "I spoke to the Gnosis and the doors should open soon. She knew how to get through."

"Great," Heat grunted, avoiding another attack. "Couldn't happen fast enough. How long?"

"I don't know specifically but I've got other news. The aliens made it in there after all."

"How the hell did they get past the turrets?" Heat took some shots at another drone, this time catching it on its side. When it tried to turn to avoid a cliff, the flap moved but it didn't provide it enough motion. Slamming into the rocks, it exploded, fire spilling down into the dust. "Those things were definitely still active."

"If they're in there, we can ask them," Gorman replied. "But … oh shit!"

Their conversation ended as they both had to fight for their lives. If these drones are allowed to keep going, it won't matter if those doors open. We'll be long dead. Hurry up, you ancient alien tech pile of crap! Hurry!

***

Energy bolts flew past Nolan's cockpit, drones blasting away at him. His defenses fired back, catching one immediately and chasing others. The rest of Rhino Squadron was faring pretty well but the number of ships attacking them intensified the closer they got to the platform. Luckily, the automated ships didn't seem programmed to simply ram them.

Such a ploy would've been difficult to counter.
Vincent pinged him, "How close are you? The marines are getting hammered on the surface by these things and it looks like your platform might be the only thing left controlling them."
"We're nearly there but we have to get close," Nolan replied. "If we fire too far out, we'll give them plenty of time to shoot down our ordnance and that would end this run really fast. Believe me, no one wants this thing taken out more than me. They're all over us out here and Charger's got their hands full too."
"Increase speed if you can," Vincent replied. "Things are getting intense all over the place."
Nolan wanted to ask how the Gnosis was doing with their own problems but he couldn't afford the distraction. If they were in trouble, he didn't want to know about it in the middle of one of the most dangerous flights he'd ever engaged in. Even success might pull his mind in the wrong direction.
Best to stay focused on the target.
"I'm hit!" Flying Officer Red Halden called out. "Engine one is offline. Still operational … but I might slow down a bit, sir."
"Do what you can, Red." Nolan cursed internally. Their bombers were heavily armored and had fantastic shields. The drones clipped Nolan's ship a few times but they hadn't breached his defenses yet. If they were able to get through one of them, they must've hit him hard. Vincent wasn't kidding. We really need to move.
Their ordnance would make the target from their current distance but there was a lot of open space between them and the platform. These drones were quick enough to chase the bombs and take them out, with guns if not straight ramming them. Nolan felt like they needed to close the gap to at least half the distance they were at to ensure contact.
Maybe a couple shots would relieve the tension. Checking his payload, he still had four total bombs and if that proved true, most of his people would be around there too. Firing one wouldn't be a problem. Whatever they had left would more than annihilate their target and would likely be dramatic overkill.

“I’m firing my first shot,” Nolan announced. “This is just to see if we can relieve the pressure, get these guys to chase a bomb instead of us. If they ignore it, we’ll be firing en masse shortly so get ready.” He depressed the trigger and felt the clunk below him of the bomb releasing from the vessel and rocketing off toward the platform.
The turrets chased several drones that went after it, each one taking shots, the streaking ordnance plunging toward their base. Their bombs were tough and it took quite a bit of punishment before they took out the engine. It continued to drift and Nolan accessed the remote detonation of the device, igniting it.
An orange ball appeared some distance ahead of him, taking out several of the drones at the same time. “Okay, so it did what I wanted but not what I hoped,” Nolan said to the others. “We still need to close the distance. You saw how much. Go to full throttle. Charger, protect Rhino Six. He’s not going to be able to keep up.”
“We’ve got his back,” Jager said. “But be advised, I’m down to four pilots and one of them has a busted stabilizer. This is nuts.”
Understatement of the decade.
“Sir,” Micah spoke up, “These beasts have a hard time with maneuvers at full speed. We’ll have to disengage the safety protocols if we hope to pull up based on the distance we need to be at.”
“I know … We can also start slowing down near the target zone.”
Nolan checked his scanner. “It’ll take us nearly five minutes to get where we need to be at current speed. If we boost up, we’ll be there in one and a half. The difference will be huge, believe me.” Another drone strafed him and his turret took them out. Still, his shields dropped by ten percent.
“I see what you mean,” Micah replied. “Let’s do it.”

***

Doctor Jason Holland had something just short of a crisis on his hands. The wounded from the ship poured into the medical bay. Their injuries ranged from minor to severe. A lot of burns from shorted panels but also concussion damage as well. With all the heavy

maneuvers the ship kept taking, people were being jostled around who couldn't be strapped down.
The medical team themselves were suffering from it. Everything had to be lashed down like they were on a sailing ship from the old days. Jason sent an updated report of the people his team were tending to and let them know that no essential personnel had shown up yet. He felt like it might be a matter of time.
I'd love to see what's going on out there but I don't have the luxury. Are we in a situation where we're going to die at any moment? I can't think that way. Focus on the job, Jason. Just remain focused.
The patients in his care asked the same question in a variety of ways. There was fear but more frustration. Many wanted to get back to their posts but were sent by section heads. The dedication to their duties impressed the doctor but he saw why they were there. Most had been hurt too badly to continue to function at peak capacity.
Then again, maybe we should've left those who weren't hurt too badly behind. We'll need them to be performing their duties rather than sitting down here. For that reason, he discharged those who could perform the minimum requirements of their jobs and sent them back to work.
The rest who stayed truly could not function and the medical team focused on their needs. At least those who needed care would get it but just as he sent the last man through the door, three more entered. Jason sighed and sent up another report, letting the bridge know what was happening. I hope they wrap this up soon. We can't keep taking this kind of beating.

***

Nathaniel dispatched his team to various parts of the ship, coordinating them from his central control panel in engineering. They were keeping things together but would have a lot of work ahead of them when the fighting stopped. So far, the engines and hyperdrive module remained undamaged but they had to fix the hull damage before they left.

Luckily, the automated repair systems could get them to a point where travel was safe. If only they would be allowed to work for a while without another heavy blow undoing some of their work. Most of their problems came from different shorts throughout the system, strain they hadn't anticipated or at least planned for.

Rerouting power worked and Nathaniel had an entire list of systems to overhaul to prevent the problems from occurring in the future. They'd hoped to discover this stuff slowly, in a controlled manner. Combat certainly gave them immediate feedback, though not exactly how they'd like it.

In the back of his mind, he questioned whether they should've engaged the enemy. He took the required tactical courses to become an officer while at the academy so he understood Captain Bradford's rationale. The enemy was engaged with a hostile force and they could take advantage of that.

Still, it felt foolhardy. There were five large ships against their one. Numerous fighters. All the drones. A defensive platform and then a whole lot of unknown on the surface. Depending on how badly they were hurt at the end of the battle, Desmond would either get a commendation or a court martial.

I suppose I'm just in a critical mood since I'm seeing what every blow we take causes. Nathaniel's com started buzzing and he went back to coordinating his folks, putting aside his concerns. It wasn't his place to judge the command crew, especially when they had probably already survived the situation longer than they should've.

Time to have a little faith, I suppose.

***

Heat heard something scraping behind him, something that would've been ear shattering had it not been for the noise reduction technology in his helmet. Glancing back, his heart beat a little faster. The doors were opening but they did so at such a sluggish pace, he actually groaned. It would take half a minute to open enough for a marine to get through in his armor.

Perfect! Another strafing run battered his guys and he thanked whatever maker was out there that they'd be done with the battle in a few moments. That's when the doors stopped moving, freezing in place. "Gorman!" Heat shouted. "Get back to that panel and see what the hell happened! Get that agent back on the line! Now!"
He aimed skyward and fired at the incoming drones. They needed something to happen soon: escape or relief. Either one suited him just fine.

***

Desmond watched another of the enemy vessels list, their engines flickering out before their reactor sparked and exploded. The final two ships closed quickly, unleashing a constant barrage of fire at them. Most of the hits blew up rocks around the Gnosis but a couple got through, causing the emergency lights to kick in on the bridge.
Much of their cover had been scattered or destroyed. The Gnosis needed to get moving and though they had yet to fully even the odds, they were better off than they were moments before. Especially since the enemy seemed intent on charging them. That exhibited a level of desperation which led to mistakes.
"Full speed," Desmond said. "Play it like you're a fighter going for a rear firing solution. Salina, what's going on with the power? The lights specifically."
"Light controls shorted out in patches around the ship," Salina replied. "I've rerouted the power up here and engineering will take care of the rest. They'll be back up shortly."
The engines kicked on as they accelerated, taking a hard bank to follow the course requested. Zach watched his panel intently, bobbing his head as he counted something down. Desmond glanced at his reports, cursing at the number of injuries coming in. Those coupled with their damage meant they'd be out there for a while after the fight ended.
At least we've got the supplies for a stay.
More hits rattled the vessel as they passed under the enemy ships.

Zach pulled them up, practically spinning as he did so. The maneuver made Desmond lean hard to the left against the force and he wondered how many people lost their footing from it. As they came around behind their target, Zach initiated a barrage of shots, tearing into the rear of the enemy ship.

Shields lit up and one of the engines went dark, sparking brilliantly. It veered, trying to turn in place while the other one accelerated and headed off away from both the Gnosis and the planet. They streaked away even as their comrade turned to fire. Zach hit them again, blasting away until more fire burst from hull damage.

"Is that ship fleeing?" Desmond asked. "Salina, do you have a vector for them?"

Salina shrugged. "I don't see anything to go to on scans."

"I hope they don't have backup out there," Cassie said. Her revelation made Desmond's stomach tighten up. If they did and could call them in, the Gnosis would not survive. "I'll keep an eye on it."

The enemy fired a few short bursts, splashing into the Gnosis shields. They shook but not nearly as violently as before. Unleashing another torrent of mass drivers, Zach blew through their defenses and ripped off the entire left side of the enemy ship. The remaining piece tumbled away, forced off by a sudden discharge of pressure.

Zach got them moving backward as the enemy reactor went up. The ship disintegrated a moment later, tiny bits of debris flying in all directions. "Enemy down!" The pilot shouted. "That's it! Just the guy who ran now!"

"What's he up to?" Desmond directed the question to Cassie. "Do you still have him on scans?"

"I do … I'm picking up a strong energy reading. Um … Salina, can you take a look? I'm not sure what that is."

Salina moved to her station and took a look. She shook her head. "They're going into hyperspace, sir. They're fleeing."

"We did it." Desmond sank in his chair, allowing him a brief moment to enjoy their sizable victory. "I want a full diagnosis and estimated time to repair. Meanwhile, Vincent, what's going on with the bombers? Have they finished yet? And the marines. We need to catch

up with them as well."
"I'm on it, sir," Vincent replied. "Give me a moment."

***

Nolan was slammed into his safety straps as one of the drones hit him from behind. It didn't give itself enough time to escape before the turret took it down but the damage was done. One of his engines started acting up, fluctuating between on and off. He rerouted some power and gave himself an extra boost on his good engine, turning off the other.
The last thing I need is to blow up from secondary damage. He checked the distance to his target and noted they would be able to fire in less than twenty seconds. So damn close! I can practically taste the deployment.
"Get ready, everyone. Our moment's about here."
Someone fired a bomb early, the heat corona streaking in space. The drones went after it, firing wildly as they did. It nearly made the target before being taken out but the operator didn't detonate it. The ordnance did pull some of the enemy forces away but was ultimately wasted.
"Hold your fire," Nolan ordered. "That was close but we need to get all the way there. Focus, people and think. If we don't take this out, those drones will make it next to impossible to get our people off world. It's just a little longer."
Two drones flew into Nolan's path, heading straight toward him. They held their fire, seemingly intent on ramming him. His turret spun and opened fire even as he pressed the stick forward, bringing his ship into a slight dive to avoid them. The first erupted into flames and exploded but the turret cleanly missed the other.
It clipped his top, slicing straight through his shields and ripping the turret clean off his hull. His computer went crazy, warning him about the damage and mentioning hull breach. Automated repair put a forcefield up over the hole, a small one no bigger than someone's head. Nolan felt lucky to be alive.

Had he not made the decision to dive …
The drone that hit him was off his scanner. It must've destroyed itself. Great, so they can commit suicide to keep us away. That's going to make this even harder.
"You okay?" Micah asked. "That was insane."
"So far." Nolan checked their range. The optimal choice would've been another ten seconds but he felt they were close enough. "Deploy half your payload now. Keep some just in case we can get a little closer or have to make a second pass." The idea of another run made his guts ache with tension but these drones were wily.
Bombs launched from each ship in Rhino Squadron, streaking off into the darkness of space. They were spread out enough to avoid one destroying another from casual damage and as the drones tried to start chasing them, it became quite clear they wouldn't be able to take care of them all.
The first couple bombs were taken out but Nolan's scan showed they deployed fifteen. If Red was able to deploy in a few moments as well, that would add quite a few. I think we should go all out. "Everyone but Deanne, launch the rest of your ordnance. Go for it." More bombs filled the air, another fifteen heading toward their target.
"I'm here!" Red shouted. "Well … close enough! I'm firing!" Six more bombs joined the attack, these a bit late. They'd be tertiary fire if the station withstood the first two waves.
The drones went into a frenzy but they left the bombers alone. It was time to turn around and head back for the ship. Nolan gave the order and they spun around. His ship was lagging as the others passed him easily. Checking over his systems, the engines were flickering. Power was also inconsistent.
Losing the turret did far more than hamper his defenses.
"You okay?" Jager, from Charger asked him. "You're slowing down."
"They took off my turret in a suicide run," Nolan replied. "I'm having some system failures."
"I'm with you but um … look over your shoulder if you can."
Nolan complied, eyes widening as the bombs began impacting the surface of the platform. He held his breath, watching the massive

explosions rocking the target. The drones didn't even manage to take out half the ordnance. He didn't have an opportunity to see the conclusion before his computer caught his attention again.
This message was far more startling: eject.
"I've got to punch out," Nolan said. "Jager, I'm hitting it now."
"You're on my tracking," Jager replied. "We'll bring you home."
Nolan jammed the lever down, gritting his teeth as he was thrown clear of his vessel in the tiny escape pod. Weightlessness followed … accompanied by silence. He started to spin and tried to engage the rockets to steady out. They didn't appear to work and as vertigo overwhelmed him, he felt consciousness ebb into darkness.

***

Heat took aim at a drone and prepared to fire, convinced that this one would perforate him. Gorman went to work on the door only a few moments earlier but that felt like a lifetime ago while under siege. The black triangle came around and began its attack run. The weapons lit up half a second before it should fire … when the engines suddenly stopped and it began to tumble. Heat's eyes widened as it sailed over his head toward the structure. "Gorman! Bounce to your right! Now!"
He saw Gorman flee the panel half a second before the drone slammed into the wall just above the door. It exploded, bringing the ancient stone down and with it, the door frame. Both collapsed into the dust with a ground shaking crunch. While that may have been the most dramatic end, other drones were dropping from the sky as well.
They hammered the cliffs and rocks all around them, exploding when they connected. Thank God, Gnosis or whoever finally took that thing out. I'm buying you a basket of bath products.
The marines converged on the downed door, aiming into the tunnel beyond. It was well lit with a tile floor blessedly free of dust. Something kept the place clean, probably more robots. Heat turned to the others, considering the situation. They had a great deal to take care of in short order.
First, with the drones down, the aliens would be free to move about

again. They could be upon them at any moment. Second, Heat wanted the shuttle to be on the move to give them an extraction. Third, they had an injured man who couldn't go with them. His leg joint was fused from the attack he endured.
Bosh was lucky he didn't lose the leg.
"Let's fall back into the facility," Heat said. "Bring Bosh. We can hold that area easily enough against an incoming force. I'm going to call for some air support to get our shuttle here for extraction. Anderson and Vine will be here soon. Meanwhile, Kelly and Dorian will be on door detail. The rest of us are going to complete the mission."
Dorian hummed. "If they bring that shuttle with them, we're going to be in a rough spot. Especially with Bosh down."
"Not when Raptor gets here." Heat pulled up the pilots on his com. "Raptor One, this is Sergeant Heathrow on the surface. We require immediate and continuous air support. Do you copy?"
"This is Flight Leader Dimitri Gerrit. I'm afraid we lost Raptor One. We're on our way and should be over your position in the next couple minutes. Hold tight."
"There you go," Heat turned to the others. He raised Vine next. "Drones are offline. Anything preventing you guys from getting your asses over here in a hurry?"
"No, sir. We're on our way."
"Everything's coming together. Time to wrap this up and go home, guys." Heat turned and started down the tunnel. "Just follow me."

***

"Drones are down," Vincent reported aloud. "Rhino took down the platform and we're receiving reports that the drones are no longer fighting. They're just … drifting out there. We did it!"
"Hold off on that," Desmond replied. "Zach, get us back to orbit. I want a full report from the marines. If they need help, we're finally in a position to give it." He turned to Cassie. "Did you help them get through the door?"
"It was opening," Cassie replied. "But then we got into the final brawl

and I lost contact with the surface. Too much interference. When we get closer, I'll definitely be able to check. I've got the protocols for their HUDs still."

Desmond leaned back in his seat and turned to the damage report. Nathaniel was estimating three days of repairs before they could leave the system. Supplies would easily hold for another month and longer if they took to rationing. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Earth would assume they were dead after a week.

"Congratulations, sir," Vincent said, keeping his voice low. "That was an insane battle and you pulled it off."

"I wouldn't have even tried it if the planetary defenses hadn't already beaten down our opponents. Hell, we would've shown up to find ten of them here … or worse, they would've already looted the Orb and been gone." Desmond shook his head. "Frankly, I feel like I got lucky. It does seem that our focus on military tech won the day."

"At first, I considered their tech better but now I'm leaning toward simply different." Vincent shrugged. "Charger squadron reported some straggler fighters but they've been dealt with. We lost a couple of ships as well. I'm compiling the casualty reports now and should have them in the next half hour."

"Thanks," Desmond said. He looked at the view screen at the fast approaching planet. "When we arrive, have another shuttle deployed with marine reinforcements. They can help mop up and finish this op up. Allocate all available resources to repairing the ship. Get some strict adherence to shifts though. Exhausted people make mistakes."

"They're going to be motivated." Vincent started tapping on his screen. "Everyone will want to go home."

"That's why it'll be our job to temper their enthusiasm." Especially considering the cargo we'll have. I'm pretty sure that'll raise tensions a bit. Considering what these aliens were trying to do to get it, I'm feeling a little twitchy about bringing it on board as well. Or taking it home. We were a target worthy of a split attack before but with two? Desmond shook his head at the thought and forced himself to consider the rest of the current operation. They had enough going on without worrying about the future too. He'd have plenty of time for that on

the ten hour trip home and after everything he saw, he'd have a lot on his mind indefinitely.

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Chapter 10

Heat led the way into the hallway, moving to the left the moment he passed the fallen doors. The smooth floor was shiny and scans identified it as a type of manufactured metal. Light barely touched the apex of the arched ceiling, which towered nearly two stories above them. Whatever they needed to get inside that place must've been massive.

The hallway went on for nearly three hundred yards with the first set of doors fifty yards from the entrance. They'd have to cross the distance without cover but if something happened, there was enough height to make a hop possible. Heat set the doors as the first rally point and ensured his guys knew to stagger their line by ten feet, on the left and right.

Hugging the wall, his scanner picked up motion through a set of doors at the end of the area. Beyond that, a massive energy reading emanated from the center of the complex, which seemed to branch off a mile in each direction under the rocks. According to the scans, two main hallways made a plus sign in the middle and smaller corridors branched off.

If it was anything like Gamma Alpha, many of the rooms would be for research. Various offices would make up the rest along with lab space for researchers and technicians. He imagined the place used to be bustling with people all intent on devouring the knowledge they gathered from their Orb.

The lack of life made the place feel eerie, like an abandoned tomb.

"Sergeant Heathrow, this is Commander Bowman."

"Go ahead," Heat replied.

"I'm checking in. How're things going down there?"

"We're inside the facility marching toward the largest energy reading. I suspect it's their Orb. Be advised, there is an alien presence in here. They seemed to get the door open before we got inside."

"Okay. You've got some reinforcements on the way. They'll touch down shortly."

“Sounds good. Thank you, sir.” Heat nearly reached the doors. “Is there anything else you need?”
“No, go ahead.”
“Thank you.” Heat set the connection to stand by and paused at the door, looking it over for any means of opening it. There wasn’t a panel or any other protrusions indicating a method to access it so he continued down the line. They didn’t have time to investigate anyway. The enemy still represented a credible threat to mission success. Unless Charger took out their shuttle. Then the fight would essentially be over. The marines could sit back and starve them out if they had to. However, Heat fully intended to take the facility by force. No one knew how far away their base of operations might be. They could have reinforcements already on the way.
Moving further down the hallway, a firefight broke out up ahead. Someone shouted and a moment later, an explosion shook the floor. Heat scanned the area, specifically looking for a report on the structural integrity of the facility. He didn’t want to be buried alive in there but it came back showing they weren’t in any danger.
The place appeared to be built to withstand a serious bombing and even though it must’ve been ancient, something kept it up. Whatever robots maintained it were doing a fantastic job. Dust clung to the walls but the bones of the building remained strong. The notion of these automatons working after the end of the world felt eerie. Everyone’s dead but their legacy lives on in this monument to their technical successes.
“Contact!” Gorman kept his voice low despite the fact his helmet obscured his speech. “Non hostile I think.”
A figure slipped out of the door at the end of the hall, watching behind him. He didn’t notice the marines until he’d taken a good ten paces. They aimed their weapons at him and when he turned around, a cry of surprise tore through him and he threw his arms in the air and dropped to his knees.
“You … You are …” His English was heavily accented but easy enough to understand. His dark hair was cut short and his blue eyes seemed to glow in the low light. He was slight of frame, wearing a blue jumpsuit

like the other aliens they'd encountered. "You are humans, yes? Soldiers of Earth?"
"Who the hell are you?" Heat asked. "Are you surrendering?"
"Surrender …" The word didn't immediately register but when it did, his eyes widened and he nodded. "Yes! I … Well…I was a prisoner of the Tol'An but I've escaped! They're pinned down, battling the turrets in an attempt to take the Trindisha. I very much suspect they will lose that fight."
"You didn't answer my first question."
"I'm … in your tongue … hm." The alien looked down in thought. "Ah! I am a Doctor. Researcher. Studier. Um … my name is Thayne Rindala."
"And why did these people capture you?" Gorman asked. "Or … whatever they did to bring you here."
"I am an expert on the Trindisha. I've dedicated my life to their study. I discovered the hive connectivity of them, how they communicate with one another and through that, I was able to determine their locations all across the galaxy. The Tol'An have been searching ever since but they are dangerous!"
Heat narrowed his eyes. "The ones outside won't be anymore. I'd like to believe your story but I'm afraid we're going to have to restrain you until you can be questioned."
"This I understand, much as I find it … um … regrettable? Yes. That is the word." Thayne held his hands out. "Please … just keep me away from these fiends. They are murderers and worse! They must be stopped."
"Yeah, we intend to do just that." Heat gestured to the Doctor. "Gillet, take care of him. The rest of you come with me."
They advanced down the hallway past the doctor while Gillet cuffed him. The door remained open from where Thayne came from and they peeked in. Whatever fight was going on had stopped and a body sat not five feet away, lying on its back. Other Tol'An agents were blown to pieces here and there, making the scene absolutely ghoulish.
"What the hell did this?" Heat shouted back at Thayne. "What're we about to walk in on?"

“Automated defenses … turrets in the ceiling and there was a robot vehicle in the center of the room but it has been dispatched. I think, at least. I broke free and ran as quickly as I could.”
“Lovely.” Heat sighed. He tried to scan the room but didn’t come up with anything hostile. “I’ve got nothing. Gorman?”
“Same. Whatever’s in there is obscured by some kind of interference.”
The energy readings from what Heat assumed was the Orb started to mess with their instruments. It would only get worse before it got better. A distant rumble represented a ship coming close. There were too many options for who it could be so he brought everyone up on the com to ask.
“Who’s here?”
“Our shuttle’s arrived with Vine and Anderson. Raptor’s also overhead now. We have air superiority.”
“Thanks.” Heat cast his gaze about the room, trying to determine where the turrets might fire from. The bodies had been blown to pieces so finding a specific vector was difficult. Without scans, he couldn’t be certain either way and there weren’t any holes in the floor. Only the bodies took the damage. “We have to draw some fire.”
“I’ll do it,” Gorman said. “I can get across that room in a hurry and there appears to be cover on the other side.”
Indeed, the room itself was mostly wide open but there were a few panels of what appeared to be computers here and there. If one hurried, they could get to the other side and press themselves against one of the metal cabinets. However, without knowing where the turrets were, it would be difficult to find protection there.
Heat said as much.
“What do you want to do then?” Gorman asked. “We have to get through here somehow.”
“Why didn’t you guys hack these things?” Heat shouted back again. “You got through the door readily enough.”
“These are … How do you say …” Thayne really struggled to find the words. “Grid hop? Um … Independent? No, no … Oh! Off the grid! They are not on a network. They cannot be accessed remotely and their control systems are hard-coded into the devices. Only the

original operators can get through their defenses."
"Why?" Gorman asked.
"Because they would have some kind of friendly beacon to keep them safe."
Gillet shoved past them and hurried into the room before Heat could stop him. Turrets from the four corners popped up and began shooting at him. He hopped about, using his jump jets in short bursts to increase his mobility. Heat was right about the cover, it wouldn't help and after a quick hop around the entire room, Gillet came back out the door.
The gunfire stopped. "There," Gillet said. "You know where they are now."
"Great work." Heat whacked him on the shoulder. "Not exactly what I was hoping but I guess I appreciate it." He turned to the others. "We know what to shoot now so I guess we do another hotfoot routine and take them out. I'll mark targets on your HUD and you guys start shooting. We need to make short work of these for whoever's out there."
"I'll do it again," Gillet said. "I've got the lay of the land … so to speak."
"You're crazy," Gorman replied. "But good luck, man."
"Just don't miss." Gillet drew a deep breath. "Here I go."
Heat aimed at the far side of the room on the left. Gillet dashed forward and the turrets dropped again, unleashing a torrent of fire after him. The marines battered at the emplacements but by the time Gillet was nearly around the room, they didn't seem to do any appreciable damage.
"Cease fire!" Heat shouted, giving Gillet a chance to duck back into the room. "That … didn't work."
"So glad I went out there then," Gillet panted. "What're we going to do? There's a bunch of bodies in there … Looks like they tried to take these things down with force too. Also, I think I got hit on the shoulder …"
Heat checked him over and there was a black mark where one of the energy blasts struck him along the way. At such close proximity, scans

worked to indicate that the armor was still fully functional. It must've been a graze. He stepped away. "You'll be fine. You don't even need repairs."
"We can try rockets," Gorman said. "I've got two left."
"Anyone else?" Heat asked. No one spoke up. "I don't think this is a brawn situation. We need to figure out how to shut these things down, even if that involves busting some power lines or something."
A low hum came from the opposite side of the room, like a motor whirring up. They aimed their weapons through the door and Heat tried to scan it. Interference made it impossible and he cursed, contemplating their next move. Whatever that is won't be good and if we can't get by these damn turrets, what's next? Go around?
A wheeled robot rolled into the center of the room and began to police the alien bodies. Heat exchanged a look with Gorman who shrugged. "What the hell is that thing going to do with them?"
"Recycling, I believe," Thayne said. "It makes sense given the surprising lack of vermin and other creatures in this facility. We didn't find any organic tissue in the area so we assumed they must keep the place very clean. Sterile in fact."
"Lovely …" Heat hummed. "We need another way around."
"We couldn't get through that door thing," Gillet said "No panels."
"Wait!" Thayne called out. "I can get you through the access ways. There's a trick to it, you see."
"And can we get to our destination through there?"
"Yes," Thayne replied. "The complex passages link up and form a continuous path. There's no incomplete paths. Er … You call them… um…dead ends! That's it. Please, assist me with getting there. I will help."
"Release him," Heat said. "He's unarmed and wants to help, let's give him the chance."
Gorman didn't seem particularly pleased at the prospect but complied, helping the doctor up and taking the restraints off. The man immediately hurried over to the door they passed and swiped his hand along the edge of it. A square that had looked just like the wall began to glow green and Thayne drew a couple of symbols on it.

When he finished, the door slid open and he stepped back. “There you are. This is a normal office. The place we were attempting to cross was a major control room. You should not encounter any stationary defenses but there may be additional automated response units. We did take care of one outside before making the dash in.”
“How did you avoid those turrets at the door?” Heat asked. “They popped up the second we got too close.”
“I figured out how to spoof them but it was too late for some of the Tol’An. They were overly eager to get at the door, despite my warning.” Thayne frowned. “In any event, we should be able to advance now. Shall we get to the Trindisha? I’m of the opinion all of us would like to leave this very dead planet.”
Heat stepped up and checked inside, noting there was nothing but a desk and another door within. He walked in and moved to the other side of the room. The door slid open as he approached, revealing a slightly larger office with more desks and a couple of blank monitors hanging on the walls.
“There are computers in here,” Gorman said. “Hey, Thayne, do you think you can access them? Shut down the turrets or any other automated defenses?”
“That might be a good idea,” Thayne said. “The Trindisha will not fit through these doors. We’ll need access to the control room so we can get it out of here.” He approached one of the desks and started tapping away at the surface. It lit up, coming alive as he worked.
Heat marveled at how the previous race that lived there used their technology. Common surfaces became interfaces, saving space and resources. He wondered how it worked but his curiosity was idle at best. Humanity might well have already been able to do such a thing but it made it no less interesting.
“Oh dear,” Thayne said. “It seems that they truly wanted to keep that device here.”
“What’s wrong?” Gorman asked. “What did you find?”
“It seems that the automated defenses are the least of our problems at this time. They have a countdown … A um…device…explosive? Is that what you call destructive items?”

“Wait.” Heat joined him. “You’re talking about a bomb. Where is it?”
Thayne gestured around him. “This facility, the entire building, it seems they’ve set it up to be quite the destructive device. If what I’m reading is accurate, then when it unleashes its fury, this will be a mighty crater. Large enough to be mistaken for a meteor strike of enormous magnitude.”
“And you mentioned a countdown,” Gillet said. “Mind letting us know how much time we have?”
“I’m converting to your time …” Thayne frowned. “It’s a very short period. Oh! Five minutes.”
“Five minutes!?” Heat took a deep breath to keep his adrenaline down. “We have five minutes to get that thing out of here? How’d it start?”
“Apparently, the Tol’An started it when they tripped the defenses in the command center.” Thayne shook his head. “This might be the end of the Trindisha … All of them, in fact.”
“What’s that mean?” Gorman asked.
“If one is destroyed, we’ve theorized they would all shut down until one is repaired. We are unable to do so with our current technology so it would be the end of them.” Thayne looked at Heat. “We must get it out of here.”
Heat cursed. “Can you shut off the bomb?”
Thayne shook his head. “No, but I was able to stop the turrets. They are off. If we hurry, we should be able to get the Trindisha to the shuttle and away before it goes off. I estimate we will have approximately thirty seconds to reach a minimum safe distance.”
“God damn it.” Heat grabbed Thayne and dragged him to the door. He started a timer on his HUD. “Gorman, get back to the front and make sure the shuttle’s ready to go. We’ll put the Orb in one and everyone else in the other. Have them idling and ready to hit the thrusters. Gillet, you’re with us. Move! Move!”
They rushed off to their tasks with Thayne and Heat bursting through the rooms until the researcher was panting and covered in sweat. They passed by other offices filled with various tech wonders but there was no time to admire them. The last door was stuck, halfway

open, and Heat used his armor enhanced strength to shove it the rest of the way.

The glowing Orb stood before them in an empty, spherical room. He could've been in Gamma Alpha. The thing looked so similar to theirs, like a perfect copy. It was taller than them but supposedly, they weren't particularly heavy. Even so, Heat knew he would need Gillet's help to carry it back out.

Heat glanced at Thayne. "Do you need to disconnect anything before we grab it? If we rip it off of there, will we hurt it?"

"One moment." Thayne rushed over and examined the pedestal. He tapped something at two points around the edge and joined them again. "It's free! Grab it and we can get out of here."

The timer showed they had less than three minutes to get it out of there. Heat grabbed it from the side away from the door and Gillet lifted on his end. "Thayne," Heat said. "Get moving. Run as fast as you can to get out of here. We'll be doing the same so stay left. Understand?"

"Yes, I do." Thayne bolted from the room, seriously moving despite his apparent exhaustion.

Heat counted down from three and they lifted, the hydraulics in their armor complaining about the weight. They moved in tandem, picking up the pace as they established their rhythm. The timer ticked down just to the left of Heat's vision, filling him with a sense of frustration at having to carry the thing.

Even when they got out of the complex, they would still need to secure it to the shuttle. Time continued to play against them, even as they crossed the control room where the turrets were dormant.

Rushing down the hallway, the light ahead gave Heat a sense of hope, even as the timer in his helmet showed they had only had two minutes left and thirty of those were reserved for flight time.

The remaining Tol'An forces had arrived and the sound of gunfire made Heat curse aloud. "Are you kidding me? They're back? These guys!"

"Welcome back, sir," Gorman shouted. "We've got the shuttle lined up to get this thing secure … Jesus, it's bigger than I thought."

“Yeah, we need a magnetic grapple to get it far enough away from here to be properly loaded on.” Heat set it down as carefully as he could and hurried aboard the shuttle. Gunshots glanced off the walls near his head. “Take those assholes out! We don’t have time for this!”
He spun the tether and pulled out the hook, dragging it toward the Orb. By the time he arrived, Gillet had already rolled it on its side to give him access to the metal part the alien culture attached it to. The magnetics on the hook should’ve been enough to keep it in place without attaching it to any protrusions but he was pleased to find a fairly stable bar on the bottom.
Latching it through there, it gripped it tightly and didn’t seem like it would let go easily. I hope this works. He brought the line back in so that the Orb was pressed hard against the back of the shuttle. “Get the hell out of here!” He shouted. “You have forty seconds to reach a minimum safe distance! Send us a rally point when you’re there!”
The shuttle lifted off and the moment it was ten feet off the ground, it sped away, igniting the engines for a quick burn. Heat fired twice at an exposed enemy, catching him in the shoulder before turning to the other shuttle. He directed his men to follow and they rushed over to board. “Where’s Thayne and Bosh?”
“They’re with the Orb,” Gorman called.
“Then go! Go! Go!” Heat shouted, grabbing the safety bar over his head.
The shuttle lifted off and hurried away, leaving the Tol’An behind to contend with the explosion. As the timer counted down, Heat watched it intently, praying they’d left in time. It went from twenty to fifteen … ten to five … He didn’t know exactly how far away they needed to be for safety but the complex was already small on the horizon.
When the explosion went off, the sky darkened over the facility. Smoke plumed miles into the air and it only took a moment before they felt the turbulence from the blast. It rocked the shuttle, making them buck like they were on a carnival ride. The pilot called out a mayday, but somehow, he maintained control.
The violent motion lasted for a good minute. All visibility around them dropped to zero. Dust and smoke consumed the air, like the

aftermath of an erupted volcano. They continued to fly to some rally point far from the carnage. Coms were down due to the explosion and they couldn't scan for the other shuttle.
I hope this was for something. Heat sat down finally, strapping himself in. After all that … What a mess.

***

Cassie witnessed the explosion on scans but the reaction from the others drew her attention to the main screen. A brown dot appeared on the surface, spreading out a good hundred miles in every direction. It didn't seem all that impressive from orbit but according to the sensors, it was a vastly destructive force.
"The facility …" Cassie whispered. "It's been … destroyed."
"How?" Desmond demanded. "What happened?"
"I … I don't know." Cassie tried to bring up more information but the area was so full of interference, she wasn't able to get any intel back.
"Salina, are you having any better luck?"
"Negative. It appears to have been a high yield explosive device … Though I'm not picking up any radiation. It was not atomic but whatever they used certainly had a similar effect."
"Our people?" Vincent asked. "Do we have them on scan? Anything?"
"There's too much noise," Cassie replied. She hesitated as a thought dawned on her. The marines, the pilots … Everyone they sent might've died in the explosion. Considering the gravity of what she was about to report, she bit her lip. "The entire area's a dead zone right now. I'm not able to get any energy readings at all."
"Salina?" Desmond asked, his voice tense.
"I concur with Agent Alexander," Salina said. "Weather patterns suggest it will clear up soon but I don't think we should risk any ships even. Not when we'll be able to scan the area soon enough."
"Understood." Desmond stood and approached the view screen. Cassie turned back to her station and waited for a window she could use to scan the area, to bring anything up, any data at all that might reveal the fate of their people. Ground zero seemed to clear up first, the

center of the blast being the facility itself.
The crater made her eyes widen. Whatever exploded left a hole roughly fifteen stories deep and it annihilated the hills around it, leveling them. The blast left no trace of the building at all and no technology appeared on her scans of the area. Anyone within ten miles would've been killed instantly, of that she was sure.
Rather than report that, Cassie continued to probe with her scanners. She needed additional data before she offered up even less hope for the soldiers. Winds cleared away the dust as a storm rolled in. Heavy rains battered the area, as if nature wanted to wash away the scar blemishing its surface.
Tech beacons began to ping them. Cassie sat up straight, trying to boost the signal until one of the shuttles came online. "I've got them!" She shouted. "One of the shuttles! Captain, it's … it's flying!"
"Salina," Desmond said, "bring them up on com."
"Working on it, sir."
"This is Shuttle Craft Omega calling Gnosis control, please come in, over."
"This is the Gnosis," Salina said. "Report your status, over."
"Mission complete," the pilot said. "The Orb is secure and we'll be heading back to the ship momentarily. Over."
The bridge crew cheered, Vincent clapping his hands in excitement. Cassie was too relieved to celebrate. Sinking in her chair, she felt as if she'd just run three miles at a full sprint. She couldn't believe the situation was over, that they'd succeeded and now had their prize. Once they repaired the ship, they could head home.
So we can figure out the next step in this new adventure.
"Shuttle Omega," Desmond said, "this is the Captain speaking. Thank you for your service and I look forward to seeing you when you land. Over and out." He turned to Salina. "Find out what casualties we're looking at. Vincent, coordinate with Nathaniel to get our repairs underway and Zach … establish a high orbit. Let's bring our people home."

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Epilogue

Desmond headed down to meet Salina and Cassie so they could talk to their guest, Doctor Thayne Rindala. He had received a full briefing from Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow and looked forward to having a chat with an alien who genuinely seemed willing to help them. Still, they kept him confined while they vetted him.

They couldn't be too careful out there in space.

Several people were killed during the mission, including two fighter pilots, two marines and some crewmen who found themselves too close to the hull during the battle. Others were injured but would pull through. Considering the odds, he thought it would be much worse but while they lost only a few lives, they took heavier losses on the equipment front.

One suit of power armor was almost useless, two were obliterated and then there were the starships. A bomber was totally destroyed and another needed a complete engine overhaul. Five fighters were total losses with three more requiring extensive repairs. The Gnosis itself required a heavy amount of attention.

Nathaniel estimated a day before they could take to hyperspace again and three more days for all systems to be normal. The hull damage required dry dock to clear up properly. Until then, they'd make it safe enough to travel. Considering the odds they faced, Desmond felt fortunate to have come away alive at all let alone with such a report.

Cassie and Salina were waiting for him as he arrived and together, they entered Thayne's room. He stood up as they entered, offering a sheepish grin. "Hello," he said. "I've met Agent Alexander … but not you two."

"I'm Captain Desmond Bradford." He gestured to Salina. "This is Lieutenant Gold, my science officer. We understand you offered a lot of help on the surface. I want to personally thank you for that."

"I was a prisoner of the Tol'An," Thayne explained. "Thwarting their plans suited me just fine."

Desmond nodded. "How did you find yourself in their influence?"

“I’m afraid I was stolen … er … You would say abducted, I believe. They took me for my understanding of what you call the Orbs.”
“And were you able to help them?”
“I had little choice. They threatened to kill me.” Thayne sighed. “I hoped to delay them longer but when they arrived in Sol, I could no longer hold them back. Because your world was occupied, they believed they could take the Orb without needing me to break any sort of codes. But the other world … We knew it was unoccupied.”
“And the drones?”
Thayne grinned. “I knew about them … but they did not. I located your Orb and the one you just claimed. I also was able to gather quite a bit of data about both places. The automated defenses may have been enough to drive them off … Unfortunately, it seemed they were more tenacious than I anticipated.”
“Tell them how they felt about the defenses when they got there.”
Thayne’s shoulders slumped. “They were quite unhappy with me. One of them nearly shot me in the head over the situation. If they would’ve known how to get into the facility, I’m quite certain I’d be dead. Fortunately for me, they did not and when we arrived, the rest of the automated defenses made slow but steady work of them.”
“Do you know why they want the Orbs?” Desmond asked. “What’s the point?”
“You already understand what wonders the Orb you possess has granted. Imagine when you double the output of power, learn how they created these devices in the first place and really get to the heart of the information available. With every one you have access to, you are able to gather more data, and with it, practical applications of their research.
“Long ago, they could be on different planets and provide the users with the benefits I just described but now, after so many years, they have lost contact with one another. They power the creations left behind … but no longer exchange information. Bringing them together not only grants a culture more knowledge but access to energy the universe has not seen in … you would say a million years.”
“Energy …” Desmond turned to Cassie. “I know that it always seems

to generate power, but I didn't know the Orb was a source. I thought it was just a storage unit."
"We've always known that it emanates power but it was decided long before I got involved that we wouldn't push our luck and try to tap into it." Cassie shrugged. "If someone made a mistake …"
"I get it."
Thayne continued, "the Trindishas seem to be designed with flexibility in … er … mind? Yes, that's it. I believe they initially built them as a means to store data and discovered a higher purpose. Whole planetary populations might draw energy from one, as an example. But what other wonders do they house? We can only guess."
Cassie added, "Imagine what we can do with two of them."
"So your culture," Desmond said, "your … your people … they are not the Tol'An?"
"Certainly not!" Thayne spoke with such passion, Desmond was convinced he might spit on the floor. "They are a … a subgroup of our people. Worshippers, if you will. They have extreme beliefs about the universe and who should be leading it. Believe me, their rule would not benefit anyone but themselves."
Desmond turned to Salina. "So we're dealing with a militant faction of their people. They can't possibly have the resources of an entire government, right?" He turned back to Thayne. "And they don't have an Orb."
"Actually …" Thayne rubbed the back of his neck. "The advantage they lost was me … but they do have one of the Trindishas. Before I was taken, they broke in and stole my people's. They are hunted, believe me … but they've been planning this for a very long time. I believe our two cultures would be great allies."
"That's some good news," Salina replied. "Depending on how many ships these Tol'An folks have, we might need them."
"Well, hold on," Thayne said. "You see, we would make good allies but do not assume such a task will be easy. I am willing to help, as much as I may, but considering our current losses, it may be a difficult sell to bring our people together. At least right away. There are challenges, you see … and Trindishas are not the only item of value in

the universe."
"What do you mean?" Cassie asked. "What other things?"
"Oh, The Tol'An have been hunting artifacts in every backwater planet they can find. Remember, they care for technology and are desperate to acquire it. While the Trindishas are by far the most sought after items, they are at the top of a very long chain. Our own people have collected some pieces and have put them on display or studied them for that matter."
"I understand the desire," Desmond said, "but what's the point? I mean, beyond academics, what do they want with these items? Are they weapons?"
"In some cases. Weapons … wonders … utilities … things to make space flight easier. Speed quicker. All things are possible out there." Thayne smiled. "This is why exploration appeals. There are not dead rocks and burning stars alone but fantastic creations waiting for discovery. People and places, monuments and artifacts … dangerous and peaceful.
"And we, your race and mine, are not the only beings to contend with. Our kind has competed and worked with others … many in fact. The Tol'An may be our most immediate threat but believe me, they will be stepping into the territory of other cultures who will not look kindly upon it. The Pahxin will likely take some of the blame."
"Are they hostile?" Desmond asked. "These others?"
"Some. Some far worse than the Tol'An." Thayne narrowed his eyes. "Some are peaceful and maintain neutrality. They have specialties, like all beings. You have entered a vast world, my friends. One I hope you are ready for and the swift course in navigating the complexities of it."
"This adds a spin to things," Cassie said. "But I think we're going to have to worry about that when we've had a chance to regroup, repair and restock. I'm afraid you'll have to come back to our world, Thayne. At least until we figure some things out. We have a lot to talk about, not the least of which being what we plan to do next."
"No one's threatened to kill me and I may be able to help." Thayne's brows lifted. "I have not been home in quite some time but when I

return, I can introduce your people to mine. Collaboration will be important in the days ahead … If we can get past their suspicion. That will be the challenge."

"Do the Tol'An know where other Orbs are?" Salina asked. "Is that the concern?"

Thayne's enthusiasm slipped and he looked away. "Yes. I gave them the location to three." His eyes lit up as he looked back at Desmond. "But the good news is they only sent the one force to collect them. It will be some time before they discover their failure. We have plenty of time in that regard."

"A ship escaped," Desmond said.

"What?" Thayne's mouth dropped open. "But … I thought you destroyed them all."

"No, one of them dropped into hyperspace in the middle of the fight. So we may not have as much time as you think."

"Oh no …" Thayne sat down heavily. "We must return to your planet as soon as possible then. Prepare them for war. Explain the circumstances. Connect with my people and hunt down the Tol'An so they cannot see their plan to fruition. I will do my best to be an ambassador in this regard but know that I commit myself fully to preventing their success."

Desmond looked at the others before speaking again. "I'm sure we'll welcome the help, Thayne. We'll have more time to become better acquainted when we drop into hyperspace but until then, I'll leave you in the capable hands of Agent Alexander and Lieutenant Gold. Oh, and … welcome aboard the Gnosis."

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Lost Systems: Legacy War Book 2

After uncovering a plot set in motion by an intergalactic terrorist organization, humanity races to discover the motivation behind their hunt for advanced technology. They deploy the spaceship Gnosis to investigate. Why are these criminals attempting to unite the most powerful technology in the universe? What is it they fear is going to happen? These questions and more lead the spaceship Gnosis on a hunt for answers.

With their ally in tow, they visit a neutral space station to find a scientist who may be able to assist their investigation. Little do they know this man is pursued by a ruthless corporation bent on salvaging technology which can be turned into weapons. Pitted against this new foe, the Gnosis finds itself against flesh eating mutants, wild weather patterns and advanced warships, all poised to take them down. Every step they draw closer to the answers they seek, the stakes rise along with the dangers, until the prospects of returning home alive seem like a fleeting hope.

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Prologue

Cassie had never stood so close to the Orb on Earth before. They kept it in a special chamber, locked up but visible through various windows where they might study it in safety. The power radiating from the device gave it a sense of danger though it never caused any harmful accidents. The mantra of better safe than sorry governed protocol.
Aboard the Gnosis in the middle of a ten-hour hyperspace jump back to Earth, a small team was allowed to really examine their new Orb. The alien device, found on a remote world far from home, had been the target for a radical group intent on stealing several of them. Their intent was not entirely clear, but they believed they might prevent a catastrophe with the tech.
Perhaps when the humans put the two Orbs in a room and connected them up, they could determine if the impending doom might be true. Cassie believed they would unlock wondrous information obscured to them before. There was no limit to how far they might advance their technology and understanding of the universe.
And for a few short hours, it belonged only to her and a small team.
Doctor Thayne Rindala assisted nearby. He'd come on board after being freed from the enemy group, one of their race but not part of their scheme that took them raiding across the universe. He squinted up at the orb while his scanner performed some type of operation. His entire body was illuminated, making his black hair look almost navy, and his blue eyes glistened.
Chief Engineer Nathaniel Webber also stood nearby though he was not studying the object. He manned the controls to seal the area should anything untoward happen. Sweat made his bald head shine in the light and he glared with his brown eyes. He'd made it quite clear he didn't think anyone should be messing with the new Orb but the captain overrode his concerns.
Cassie understood why he worried. The thing was an unknown, a strange piece of alien technology that they did not fully comprehend. Even the one they had under their influence for years hadn't been

fully explored. Many thought they were merely scratching the surface of what they had and as with most things, they knew that what they had discovered may have explosive consequences.

Interfacing with the new Orb proved particularly challenging. When they removed it from the planet, it seemed to shut off until they brought it on board the Gnosis. Once there, it sparked back to life as if it needed to be in the company of a certain amount of technology before it turned back on. Thayne suggested a certain sentience, but Nathaniel disagreed.

The engineer offered an alternative theory. He figured it simply needed residual power to be enabled though they couldn't prove it. It did not put any particular drain on their energy and didn't tap any of the generators. Whatever it did was another mystery, another question to be answered. Likely back on Earth.

Lieutenant Salina Gold arrived to help. She acted as the ship's science officer and likely performed her other duties with no small amount of frustration. Knowing what she had at her disposal, and for so short a time, had to be maddening. She'd helped them explore the alien technology when they attacked Earth and having the chance to research this was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

She wore her darker blond hair in a messy bun, likely made so by the rush down to the cargo hold. Brown eyes immediately became buried in her scanner and she didn't so much as greet anyone around her. Apparently, social niceties took a back seat to what she intended to get out of the device.

Cassie got it. Whatever they pulled from the device before they arrived at Earth would be usable data for them while high command worked out the next move. Between taking orbit at home and leaving again, they had a lot of time to kill. What better way to do so than with some new facts and potential answers to age old problems? Providing we pull anything usable from the device in such a short period of time.

The thought dampened some of Cassie's enthusiasm. Ten hours didn't mean much in the grand scheme of things. People spent years studying the other Orb before they found anything useful. They had

two advantages over their colleagues back home: standing on the shoulders of previous research gave them an edge and Doctor Rindala. Thayne came to them as an expert on the Orbs or at least, he knew more about their origins than the humans did. He admitted his own studies of the Orbs themselves remained somewhat limited by comparison. His race, the Pahxin, called the devices Trindisha. They all agreed to stick with common Earth parlance for the time being.
Cassie's scanner came back with another error and she let out a sigh, brushing a hand through her dark brown hair. Frustration threatened to overwhelm her heart and she steadied herself before trying another approach. A deeper scan of the Orb might warrant some results, or at least she'd get some decent readings of the power output.
In speaking with Thayne, they discovered that the original designers of the Orbs probably used them as energy sources. Unlimited, clean energy to boot. Cassie figured she might be able to find some trace elements of how one might tap into it. A simple breadcrumb leading toward that conclusion may well grant humanity a leg up in stepping into a larger world.
So to speak.
A sound to her left caught her attention, like a scrape of metal against stone. Cassie glanced but only saw Lieutenant Gold. No one else seemed to notice the noise so she returned her attention to the scanner. It found something, and the feedback was on its way. Her heart hammered in her chest.
"Guys," Cassie spoke up but when she looked back at her team, they were gone. She turned back to the Orb but it was no longer there either. Ground vehicles surrounded her on a busy street. People shouted in some foreign tongue she couldn't understand. Above her, a blue-green sky was covered in thick, roiling clouds.
A breeze caught her from behind and she turned wide eyed. Massive buildings surrounded her, stretching dozens of stories into the air. Heat beat down on the area, pushing at least ninety degrees Fahrenheit. It became worse every moment and suddenly, the angry shouts from the commuters around her turned to screams.
Cassie spun in place, trying to see what bothered them so much but

she didn't see anything right away. The ground shook and she nearly fell, stumbling away from the street and to a nearby sidewalk. Stone began to crumble, crunching with such violence, it seemed as if the entire area might collapse upon itself.

Fires broke out around her and a sinkhole appeared where she'd been a few moments before, swallowing several of the vehicles. People got out and made a mad dash down the street but in their terror, they were guided only by the mob mentality to move in a single, unified direction.

Cassie found herself compelled to go with them, but she remained in place. What is happening? This doesn't make any sense! How am I here?

Winds rushed through the street and she had to grab a nearby metal pole to remain standing. One of the vehicles flipped and the sky turned red. A shadow descended over the scene, but it did nothing to lower the temperature. If anything, it became hotter until she was covered in sweat.

Cassie turned to look at the people fleeing only to see most of them fell, dropping dead from whatever went on around her. She looked up, hoping to see what might be causing the damage and while she expected to see some kind of space ship, all she noted was a strange eclipse blocking out the sun.

Buildings collapsed across the street, their fall accompanied by the deafening roar of debris pounding the ground. She fell from the shockwave, hitting the cement hard. If she remained there, she'd die. There was no doubt in her mind and when she looked up, she saw more pieces of building dropping toward her. She had half a second to get out of the way but there was nowhere to go.

The sinkhole beside her dipped into glowing magma. The street around her had crumbled. She was jostled with considerable force, her head flopping back. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, she saw Nathaniel's face close to hers. He shouted her name and she realized he'd been doing so for several moments.

"What happened to you?" He asked. "Are you okay?"

The others surrounded him. Thayne, Salina and a technician she didn't

recognize. She was back on the Gnosis, far from whatever catastrophe she just witnessed. The waking dream felt so intensely real, so incredibly lifelike that she could barely believe she'd seen it. Half of her wondered if it had even happened.

"I …" Cassie looked around and gestured for her scanner lying on the floor nearby. "I picked up a reading. We have to see what it was!"

Salina grabbed it and peered at the screen, her brows lifting. "You did indeed. There was a power surge for a brief moment. Just before you called out guys to us. It's no longer happening."

"Fascinating!" Thayne clapped his hands. "Did you see something? Did anything happen?"

Cassie hesitated to reply but keeping the information from them made no sense. She drew a deep breath and explained her vision, what she saw. The details were still fresh in her mind and she was able to give them a clear picture of the horrors brought about on that planet. Additional facts came to her head: those she saw dying were definitely not human.

And it very likely happened a long time ago.

"What do you make of it, Thayne?" Salina asked. "Does this coincide with any of your studies in regards to the Orbs?"

Thayne rubbed his chin, brows furrowed. "Yes, it touches on some of my theories about how the creators of these devices used them. Their interfaces were unlikely to be in the form of wires or direct connections of any sort. They may well have implanted technology in their heads to receive the data directly. Either that … or they actually were telepathic."

"We've only brushed the surface of such mental powers," Cassie said. "Do you think they were really able to tap into something like that?"

Thayne shrugged, a new gesture he'd learned from the humans in the short time he'd been with them. "Who knows? They could have discovered anything. The vast, untapped wealth of information in these things can literally be anything. After all, your own culture proves that. Look at how far you've come in such a short period of time. Faster than light travel is not trivial."

"If that thing interfaced directly with your head," Nathaniel said, "and

it did so without you telling it to directly, it's pretty damn dangerous to be on a ship. Imagine if it did this to one of the pilots? We'd be in a lot of trouble."

"I initiated it," Cassie replied. "Just inadvertently. I might be able to replicate the process now that I've done it once. The settings on my scanner should give us another shot at … whatever that was."

Salina held up her hand. "I think we need to try any further experiments like that back on Earth under a controlled environment. Nathaniel's right that we could cause ourselves a lot more grief if we do something incorrectly."

"Agreed." Cassie said the word but she didn't necessarily believe they should stop. She wanted to take the experiment to a logical conclusion, to really test whether or not they had found some hidden data store which allowed them to assimilate information directly with their minds. Such a revelation could change everything about how they interacted with the Orb.

"We'll be home soon," Salina said. "Then we can really dive into this."

Nathaniel nodded. "Yes, for now, I recommend you get to the sick bay, Cassie. God knows what that might've done to your noggin."

"Probably a good idea," Thayne agreed. "It might prove revelatory as well. I personally look forward to the results but not at the expense of your faculties."

"I appreciate that." Cassie accepted Nathaniel's help to get up. "I'll head up there now, but you guys might want to slow down on the research as well. Lord knows what else we'll find, and whether or not it is something we want to discover while blasting through space."

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Chapter 1

Captain Desmond Bradford sat forward on the bridge of the Gnosis, watching a countdown tick by on the main view screen. They would be leaving hyperspace in less than five minutes, returning from the longest journey in human history. Everyone on board, each man and woman, became pioneers for the most impressive trip ever taken by mankind.

I led an expedition our people will talk about for generations. Even if we do nothing else from this point forward, students will talk about our deeds long after we're gone.

And they didn't simply leave the solar system and visit another world. No, they engaged in combat with an alien race and traversed the strange topography of the planet. They plunged into an automated facility and reclaimed ancient technology hidden away beneath the sands of time.

The Gnosis went well beyond the original intention of being an exploratory vessel and earned itself a place in military history as well. The marines and fighter pilots made names for themselves. Even though they lost soldiers during the fighting, they came back with experience which would be useful to them as they entered the larger arena of intergalactic politics.

A thing we didn't even know existed before the attack.

The maiden voyage of the Gnosis involved an alien race launching an assault on Earth during their absence. They attempted to steal the Orb, the source of all advanced human technology. Though they had to rush back, the crew of the Gnosis was able to intervene and prevent the theft, driving the invaders off and destroying much of their fleet. Afterward, they learned of other Orbs throughout the galaxy and determined that they must stop their enemies from acquiring another. The Gnosis was sent beyond the borders of Earth's solar system, cementing the event in history while protecting the interests of humanity at the same time.

Two minutes.

The countdown made Desmond nervous as he watched it. They had already emerged from hyperspace once from such a lengthy trip when they had visited the other system. However, their first trip had been before they entered combat. While the damage they experienced was minor, they did need to hole up for a couple days while the engineering team patched them back up.

Entering hyperspace made everyone hold their breath. Though all tests and checks suggested they had done their due diligence, a small tinge of fear hovered on the repairs. If something was missed, if anyone made a mistake, they may well not get back to Earth at all or worse, find themselves in some uncharted part of the galaxy.

No one wants to find out what it's like to be lost in space.

Hyperspace required reliable coordinates to travel to a new section of space. They needed to know where they were going and have some long-range scans of the system for predictive analysis. This would allow them to ensure they didn't emerge too close to a space body like a moon or planet. The wake of arrival was enough to shove small debris aside, but the larger obstacles would be a problem.

As they drew closer to Earth, Desmond wondered just how far out they would be when they arrived. Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan, their head pilot, worked closely with Salina to ensure they had a solid emersion point close to the moon. When they emerged, they expected between five and six hours to attain orbit.

They sounded pretty optimistic to me. Desmond thought. He didn't want to give them grief over their work, especially since the only thing telling him they would be wrong was his gut. I refuse to listen to something that's being pessimistic for no reason. Still, I'm putting my money on a ten-hour flight back to Earth.

"One minute," Zachary called out. "All systems are prepared. Thrusters are online."

"Thank you," Commander Vincent Bowman replied. As the first officer, he'd been handling all the regular operations of the ship for the past few hours. Desmond turned over control to him for the experience of it. There were hundreds of decisions to make throughout their trip home and Vincent was doing an exemplary job. "Coms,

prepare to hail Earth."
"Aye, sir," Salina replied.
"We don't want to show up and have our fleet try to engage, after all."
Vincent frowned when he said it. They'd been speculating that their own people might be twitchy after the Gnosis had been gone for the better part of five days without a word. Any arrival might be met with hostility if they didn't immediately identify themselves.
However, there was no chance they could get to an emersion point swiftly enough to attack right away. The best they could hope for was a desperate com signal asking for their intentions. Depending on how far out in the solar system the enemy appeared, only planet-bound coms would be able to reach far enough to make a connection.
If someone showed up near Pluto, they'd have plenty of time to form up before we could respond. At least until there are other ships like the Gnosis in our fleet. They already made a trip to the edge of their solar system and it was less than twenty minutes. Distances seemed to mean very little until they had to visit the other world.
Their journey would've taken multiple lifetimes before the FTL technology. Doctor Rindala suggested that with better coordinates and navigations, they might even cut those times down considerably. Desmond didn't know how much, and the doctor couldn't say right away but it was something to look into, one more piece of information to seek out.
Maybe a second orb will allow us to make that same trip in half the time or even better.
"Twenty seconds," Zach said. "I'm beginning a verbal countdown."
As the pilot spoke the numbers aloud, Desmond forced himself to sit back in his chair and relax. His heart beat a little faster. He wondered if anyone else felt the same anxiety or if their jobs kept them too busy to notice. Cassie hadn't come back to the bridge since having some kind of episode in engineering. Sitting in medical probably meant she fretted about their arrival.
Zach's voice boomed throughout the ship, piped through speakers on every deck. When he reached five, Desmond thought about what it must've been like for a first-time flyer to land on a commercial airline.

He'd read about them in school, but he had never experienced what his grandparents had talked about when they described air travel. This worry has to be roughly the same. Crashing into the ground and burning alive couldn't be too much better than what might happen if something goes wrong up here.

Of course, he knew otherwise considering the risk management questions he had to answer every time they made an adjustment to the ship. Every repair required his approval and he had to go over a long list of questions his people asked in order to make the right call. Trusting that they knew what they were doing proved easy enough, but his own judgement occasionally felt iffy.

We've all got the best training Earth can afford. I don't doubt my confidence; I doubt what we don't know. There's too much about all this we don't understand yet. I really wish we would've had a few months with this ship before we had to dive into battle with her. I'm sure she feels the same way.

"Emerging." Zach's final word accompanied a low whine that interrupted the standard hum that they'd all become accustomed to over the past few hours. Lights dimmed for a moment just as the view screen revealed their location. Luna, the satellite of Earth, was close enough to easily make out all the details.

Salina spoke up. "We have arrived within five thousand kilometers of our intended position."

Zach clapped his hands, letting out a hoot. "Welcome back to Sol, everyone."

"Very good," Desmond said. "Congratulations, everyone. Fantastic work all around. Do we have Earth control on coms yet?"

"One moment," Salina replied. "Raising them now."

"Set a course for Earth," Desmond added. "Get us moving in that direction. I'd like an ETA to orbit."

The bridge staff went about their duties, communicating with various parts of the ship. The floor vibrated for a brief moment as the thrusters fired, carrying them toward home. Desmond checked the reports from the other departments, noting that they didn't come away entirely clean.

Engineering reported a few small shorts here and there. Scanners were also impacted but the system seemed to simply need a reboot. Much like when they arrived at their destination across the galaxy, they found themselves with inexplicable system shutdowns and restarts. They needed to solve that problem.

Emerging into a combat zone and having random systems down would not be tenable.

Zach's voice nudged him from his thoughts, "ETA to Earth is six hours, thirty minutes at present speed."

"Thank you," Desmond replied. "Gives us plenty of time to acclimate to normal space."

"High command is on the line," Salina said. "Admiral Reach welcomes us back to Earth and is eager to hear our report. What reply should I give?"

Desmond weighed his response for a moment, wondering how much he wanted to offer over an open line. Ultimately, the biggest concern was whether or not they were successful and how much they had lost in the process. He decided on a simple answer, something to tide the admiral over until they arrived for a full debriefing.

"Let the admiral know our mission was successful and that we're returning with the Orb," Desmond said. "Tell them we've got a lot to discuss and we'll have a full report prepared when we arrive."

"Yes, sir." Salina turned back to her console and began relating the information quietly. Desmond turned to Vincent.

"Grab Cassie from medical and meet me in the briefing room. I'd like to get our story together in the time it'll take to get home."

"I'm on it." Vincent stood. "Zach has the bridge?"

"You heard him," Desmond said. "Zach, keep us alive while we're gone."

"I'll do my best, sir."

The two officers boarded the elevator and headed down, with Desmond getting off first on deck three. He paced into the briefing room and took his seat, booting up the main screen to prepare their presentation. While they had a great deal of information to share with the admiral, the biggest news probably came in the form of Thayne.

They all knew aliens shared the universe with them but having one that was working with them, a friendly being, made for a very different situation entirely. Thayne would be staying on the Gnosis until Desmond prepped the people of Earth for his arrival. The last thing he wanted was to have the man detained, questioned, poked and prodded endlessly.

Especially since he was so forthcoming with everything they asked of him. Thayne genuinely wanted to assist them. Desmond's challenge would be proving that not only to his superior officer but to the other authorities on Earth. I have to believe they'll do right by him. They can't possibly think every alien is bad.

Such prejudices still existed in some walks of life though they were becoming considerably rarer. There would likely always be those who thought of others as inferior and when those people were from a totally different planet, it became even easier to make such misinformed leaps of logic.

Thayne, so far, had proven to be the type of model citizen that would make a first contact situation work. His people didn't sound quite as trusting as he was but once Earth was able to reach out to them, they'd be able to begin a dialogue. The good news was they were starting out with a common enemy.

Desmond would've preferred they not have to contend with a threat as their first order of business entering the wider universal landscape, but it did have the benefit of unifying them with the Pahxin. Considering what Thayne said about their Orb being stolen by the Tol'An terrorists, this meant they should be open to negotiation. Especially since we already prevented them from picking up additional technology they should not possess.

If Desmond chose to be very honest, he had to say that Earth was not prepared to enter into a wartime situation abroad. They did not have the ships to conduct heavy battles with fleets of ships. They could defend themselves but beyond that, they did not possess the resources quite yet to take a large-scale fight to another culture.

Negotiations with the Pahxin would need to be conducted with care. They didn't want to show their inferior numbers when it came to war-

worthy spacecraft, but they also had to stand on a position of strength. Desmond figured his people would rely on the fact they were able to take down the Tol'An in greater numbers and reclaim the Orb.

Though what the Pahxin would have to say about humanity holding two orbs made the captain nervous. After all, they might well try to claim one or both devices. If they supported a large enough fleet, humanity wouldn't be able to do much about it. Earth needed to bolster their forces and quickly if they hoped to play in the new arena open to them.

But even if they did, they still did not possess an adequate understanding of everything going on out there. Such races as the Pahxin had been traveling the galaxy for long enough to have a serious understanding of different cultures. Their star maps alone would give them a significant advantage.

And they were only one species out there. What other types of people made up the galactic community? How many of them were friendly? Would they be allies, enemies or ambivalently neutral? Such cultures might be open to trade eventually, to share ideas and technology. Earth needed commodities to make such things viable or even desirable. This meant spreading throughout their own solar system and populating the other planets, mining them and building colonies to take advantage of their natural resources. There was a great deal to do and Desmond began to feel like these events might be overwhelming.

I hope our government has put some serious thought into all this or we're going to be dramatically behind.

Vincent and Cassie entered the room, the latter looking frazzled from her time in medical. The doctor sent Desmond a message stating the agent was perfectly fine and that they could find nothing wrong with her physically. Mentally might've been another story but all scans came back normal.

"Thanks for getting me out of there," Cassie said. "They were talking about putting me through a psych eval and I just did one a month ago."

"Those are miserable," Vincent added as he took a seat. "So, we need

to put together a good tale for the admiral, something he can work with, am I right?"
Desmond nodded. "Yes, I want all the facts laid out in a fashion that makes the briefing easier to accept. All reports should be attached to this primary summary. I'll run the presentation after they've had a chance to digest the work but I'm going to need to familiarize myself with what everyone's said. That means we get this done ASAP so I have a chance to read it all."
"I don't envy you," Cassie said. "This is a lot of information. The primary participants of the mission alone have dozens of pages to report. Our resource drain documents are even complicated this time around."
"Luckily, we were able to pull some salvage from the planet," Vincent said. "That should keep the quartermasters off our backs."
"Something has to," Desmond replied. "In my opinion, the hardest part of this is Thayne. When we start talking about him, they'll want him quarantined and locked up. But we've got medical records showing he's been checked out and came back safe. We've also got his own sworn testimony and those of the marines who brought him back."
"Will it be enough to assuage Gamma Alpha personnel?" Vincent asked. He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "I just don't know. Those guys are pretty twitchy, especially after the attack. You'll have to be prepared for them to call out our new friend as an accessory who's just pretending to help us in an effort to save his own skin."
"It's not a bad theory," Cassie said. "We can't prove otherwise. Yes, he's been very helpful and hasn't seemed to hold back. Still, I wouldn't put my reputation on the line that he's absolutely trustworthy."
"But he's had access to the Orb the entire time he's been on board," Desmond pointed out. "Saline and you were quite adamant that he was safe."
Cassie nodded. "Yes, and while I believe that, I can't prove it. I'm pretty sure our colleagues on Earth are going to want some assurances we simply cannot give. That's my point. More than whether Thayne's a danger to us or not, we're going to have to show some evidence

either way.”
Desmond agreed with her. Obviously, no one was simply going to take their word for it but how would they know the alien was someone to be trusted? Much as he didn’t want to see the man quarantined on Earth, it would end up being the way they’d have to go. More importantly, if he didn’t do it himself, Admiral Reach may well ask him why he didn’t.
“Okay, so when we arrive, we’ll have to get him some quarters,” Desmond said. “I think if we take the initiative there, we should be able to ensure he’s not relegated to a cell. And we’ll still have access to him to continue his work with us … and of course, he’s going to have to assist with communicating with the Pahxin.”
“Agreed,” Vincent said, taking some notes. “I can work with Gamma Alpha to find him a place to be.”
“Thanks.” Desmond brought up the reports and skimmed the different departments. While they repaired the ship, the science teams visited the planet on several different surveys. Geology brought back some pretty incredible samples. Lifeforms were at a premium, however, so they were only able to bring back minor organic samples. “These look good.”
Cassie nodded. “Those should placate many of the scientists that have been working on the Gnosis initiative for years. They’ll love to see their efforts rewarded.”
“Indeed.” Vincent tapped his screen. “And I’ve got all the atmospheric samples here as well. This is great stuff but there’s a ton of it. Imagine, this was one planet we visited! Just one! And we’ve got enough data to keep people busy for months. Possibly a year.”
“And yet we still are living under the shadow of a threat.” Desmond sighed. He turned to Cassie. “I read about your episode with the Orb. Can you talk more about it? I’m sure high command will have some interest.”
Cassie looked away but nodded. “Yes, I can describe it in perfect detail, but it lacks so many details. I don’t even know if it has a purpose. What if I just had a stress-related hallucination? I hate to say that about myself because I don’t want to be removed from duty over

it, but we have to consider the possibility."
"But," Vincent said, "according to your report, Thayne had some theories about it being an alternate method of interfacing with the Orb. Your own scanner shows how it can be done again. It seems more likely that you're able to connect with that than to suggest you're simply experiencing stress."
"True," Cassie conceded. "But I guess I'd rather the less creepy option … though maybe it's not." She shrugged. "Whatever the case, I'm ready to talk about it and I'm thankful that the medical staff proved I'm okay."
"Next order of business," Desmond said, "preparing ourselves for the possibility that we'll be heading back out soon."
"You really think so?" Vincent asked.
"Undoubtedly." Desmond gestured vaguely to the left. "Whatever those Tol'An are up to, we're the only ones out there trying to stop them right now. We know they likely have another Orb. That gives them two as well. We're in a serious arms race, in all honesty. If we don't treat it as such, we'll fall behind. Fast."
"And we still need more ships," Cassie added. "Hopefully, we'll hear about a plan to up manufacturing."
"We've got the data from that strange drone factory," Vincent offered. "Maybe we can employ some of their methodology."
"Whatever we do," Desmond said, "it needs to be implemented fast. The military doesn't tend to like to move fast unless it involves firing bullets. We'll have to seriously push them. All of us from a unified front. Now, let's start at the beginning of these and see what we can do to get through it all as quickly as possible. Let's start with engineering."

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When the Gnosis established orbit around the Earth, Desmond, Cassie and Salina were prepared to disembark. Two marines accompanied them, acting as guards for Thayne, who would be handed off to Doctor Harper for quarantine. The admiral was shocked to hear they

brought a Pahxin back with them, and even more so when he heard the man was friendly.
“Regardless if that’s true,” Reach said, “I want him kept safe and sound at Gamma Alpha. Let’s not take any chances.”
Vincent and Cassie were right about that part of the situation. No chances would be taken. No one wanted to risk a saboteur or terrorist being free in their midst. Even when he was working on the engineering section with the others, armed guards stood nearby. They were prepared for him to do something dangerous, but he’d proven to be benevolent so far.
The shuttle broke atmosphere and headed straight for the first landing pad at Gamma Alpha. After a forty-minute trip, the ship landed and they all disembarked, Thayne being led off to the facility. There, he’d be introduced to Doctor Harper and shown to some quarters where he’d be confined until further notice.
Desmond intended to advocate for him, especially since he considered the man to be essential for their conversation with the Pahxin. Without him, they would not be able to even send a message let alone know exactly what they were saying. Connecting with the other race seemed absolutely necessary to keep the Earth safe.
If they played their cards right, they’d make a new ally, their first in the galactic arena.
Unless we make them mad immediately. Then we can add another to our list of growing enemies.
Desmond led the others to the control center of the facility where they met Admiral Reach. As they approached, they saluted the man, but he stepped forward and immediately shook their hands.
“Congratulations, all of you. Regardless of the gravity of what we’re dealing with, you’re already heroes of this planet. Good work. All of you.”
“I sent along the reports,” Desmond said, “but I understand you probably haven’t had a chance to read them all yet.”
“Not yet,” Reach said. “But we can go over them in detail now. Doctor Harper will want to be present, so we’ll have some time. Each of you has a room down here to relax. Agent Alexander, I believe your

superiors are going to want to have a word with you. I'm going to go through the essentials of your report and we can meet back up at sixteen hundred."
"Sounds good, sir." Desmond nodded once, turning to Salina and Cassie. "You two okay for now? Do you need anything from me?"
"I'm good." Salina nodded. "I look forward to having some time on the ground before we go back up. Artificial gravity is nice and all, but nothing beats the real thing."
"Yeah, I'm fine too." Cassie looked more nervous than okay, but Desmond didn't want to push her in front of the admiral. "I'll see you all at sixteen hundred. Thanks."
"I'll send out a meeting invite," Reach said. "Keep an eye out for it." He glanced at Desmond. "Again, great work. Enjoy a little downtime. Believe me, you've earned it."
"Thank you, sir." Desmond saluted the man again before directing his attention to the sky. The clouds were sparse that day, offering up a wide, blue expanse. At night, they'd be able to see some of the fleet orbiting the planet but just then, the view was the same as his ancestors had seen for hundreds of years.
They lived here blissfully ignorant of all the drama of galactic affairs. The burden of taking this step falls to our generation. I hope we're ready. We have our flaws, our problems and disagreements but I'd like to think we're enlightened enough to make the leap to partners with other cultures.
I guess we'll see how true that is based on how Thayne is treated. We have to be worthy of this responsibility. And the only way to prove it is through our actions. Good, bad or indifferent, every decision pushes us toward the judgement of those waiting to see our intention. This will be a lot of work.

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Chapter 2

Desmond and Admiral Reach spent nearly four hours together in the briefing. They discussed the combat portions of the mission and what tactics were used to defeat the Tol'An. After the larger parts of the mission were discussed, they delved into the smaller details of resource expenditure and how the hyperspace trip worked out.

"You know," Reach said, as they came to an end of the talk, "I believe I told you to leave if you found the force overwhelming. From what you described, going at them with a single ship might've been suicidal."

"The fact that they were engaged with the automated defenses gave me the feeling I could take them on," Desmond replied. "They were essentially pinned between us and those drones. Our challenge came from taking out the defenses so that they didn't turn on us. And more importantly, freeing up our ground forces to operate without direct fire on them the whole time."

Reach nodded. "Quite the gamble … but I can see why you took it. And it paid off too. Good work bringing the Orb back. We'll break for dinner and discover what Doctor Harper has to say. She's had some time with your alien friend and might be able to shed some light on the galactic situation by now."

"He's been quite open with us so far," Desmond said. "I'm fairly certain we could just put him in a room and he'd talk."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to play this cautiously. We're in a delicate time right now. Humanity just received irrefutable proof that we're not alone in the universe and we learned it by looking down the barrel of a gun. Friendly visitors are going to need to prove themselves a little more before we welcome them with open arms."

"Understood." Desmond stood and offered a salute. "Conference room Six B, right?"

"Yes, see you back here then."

Desmond didn't have a stomach for food, but he nibbled anyway. At nineteen forty-five hours, he found himself tired from the briefing,

and they had more to do. The next steps involved learning more from Thayne, if Harper got anything out of him, and determining what their next course of action would be.

He hoped his colleagues had a chance to get some rest before they met up again. It seemed like they'd need it. Desmond knew his people would be afraid after the attack, but he hadn't been out amongst the regular population. Did they even truly know yet? And if they did, were they in a state of panic?

Desmond checked the news feeds but didn't find any coverage of the situation. Had the military covered it up so effectively already? The aliens did attack them in orbit and went after a secret facility. Perhaps it wasn't so difficult to believe that only a select few humans even knew they'd been attacked by an outside force.

Of course, Reach made it sound like there were more. High level leaders no doubt. The type that could keep a secret straight to the grave. He wondered how Cassie's meeting with her superiors went and if they had their own concerns about the situation. The AIA may well know more than anyone about the situation.

Would they let her in on any of their secrets? Did Desmond know her well enough to believe she might confide in him? He hoped so but didn't plan to push. After all, she might have her own restrictions in talking about her organization's plans. Prior to the attack on the Earth, people thought of them as the boogie men.

If they have something up their sleeve to help us, I'll take back everything I ever speculated about them.

***

Cassie arrived in the Gamma Alpha hangar just after eighteen-hundred hours. The place was uncharacteristically empty, meaning her people had commandeered the entire area for their meeting. It didn't make sense. The traffic in and out of the area should've made this an impractical location to meet.

But then again, her superiors never really minded disrupting other people for their causes.

“Agent Alexander.” Cassie recognized the voice as the director of the AIA, Beaumont Dulain. She’d seen his likeness on monitors and listened to his speeches but never met him in person. He ran the entire organization, and some would argue he held significant sway over the government. Enough to ensure the AIA had a say in any major decisions with the Orb.

“Sir.” Cassie nodded once but she didn’t know where the man was. The room was vast, and his voice echoed off the ceiling. She looked around casually, hoping to catch a glimpse of something that might tell her where he was, but nothing stood out. There was a single shuttle in the bay, another oddity, and all the storage crates were neatly stacked against the walls.

The open space provided no room to hide. He must be in the shuttle.

“Thank you for coming. Feel free to hop aboard.” The ramp to the shuttle dropped. “We need to speak in private.”

Very private, Cassie thought. Real nervousness began to grip her stomach, a firm squeeze, as she headed over and walked up the ramp. She expected a normal military or commercial shuttle but this one bordered on luxurious. Cushioned seats lined the walls and there was enough tech inside to run a large nation just from the cabin.

Beaumont sat at the back with two dark clad agents flanking him. They were clearly armed as she approached but they weren’t what she focused on. Mister Dulain did not look at all like he did on his video feeds. In those, his skin was smooth and his hair a perfect shade of dark brown.

In person, he wore lines around his mouth and eyes and gray took his temples. He gestured to the chair to his left. “Have a seat.”

Cassie sat down but couldn’t relax. She sat up straight and waited for him to speak.

“I’ve seen the briefings from your captain,” Beaumont said. “They were quite thorough. It seems that against all odds, you were successful. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And you were able to bring home a somewhat friendly alien as well. Unexpected. Doctor Harper’s making fantastic headway with him.

Apparently, he wants to stop these … Tol'An as much as we do. Seems he's personally affronted by the fact they kidnapped him. Can't say I blame the poor guy."
"No, me either." Cassie refrained from swallowing hard. She wanted to ask a question but held her tongue.
"I expect you will all be heading back out to space quite soon. In fact, I would be surprised if you stay here an entire week, but I didn't get into the nitty gritty details of your damage reports." Beaumont considered his hand for a moment. "Of course, I have no idea where they're going to send you but I'm hoping you're prepared for the next voyage?"
"They told me I'd be part of the crew," Cassie replied. "I didn't think it would be for a single trip."
"Excellent. Much as I'd like to have your insights here on Earth, I think you'll be better used out there, keeping an eye on things." Beaumont frowned. "I'm going to grant you an authority that I expect you won't need but it could come in handy. Considering your experience with space flight, I'm thinking you'd rather not use it."
"Sir?"
"You will have authorization codes to take operational command of the mission, should the need arise."
"Oh, sir … I … I don't think that's a good idea. I mean, I understand technology and know how the Gnosis works but Captain Bradford is a real expert. Look at the briefing. He handled the enemy incredibly well. The odds were stacked against us in a major—"
"I know, I know." Beaumont interrupted. "I'm not suggesting you use this to become the captain of the Gnosis. However, once you understand our interests in this matter, you might need to flex some muscles to fulfill our goals. You see, the second Orb is fantastic, but we know there are other items out there … some quite dangerous … that the military may not deem worthy of pursuit."
Cassie's brow furrowed. "And how do you think I'd fare on board the ship if I suddenly assumed command to have them go after one of these items? Do you think I'd be welcome to go back out with them the next time?"

“My recommendation is that you speak to the captain in private and let him know that we’re keen on these items and that he should work closely with you. You might even tell him about the command authority.” Beaumont smiled. “In fact, use it as a point of conversation. Tell him the AIA gave you this, but you would never use it.”

“You don’t think he’ll see through that?”

Beaumont shrugged. “I suppose it depends on how much you’ve ingratiated yourself amongst the crew. The briefing speaks of how helpful you were. Is it true?”

Cassie nodded.

“Then you should have the rapport to have the conversation … or save it as an ace up your sleeve. The point is, we need a representative up there who will represent our needs. You’re in place and though I know this is your first field assignment, you’ll have to remember your training and obligations.”

“Understood, sir.” Cassie forced herself to take a neutral tone. She didn’t like it, but he was right. She didn’t have to use it. Unfortunately, if she brought it up there would be a veiled threat behind it. Follow the AIA directive or I’ll be forced to make you. Beaumont put her in a tough position, but she had time to think of a way out.

“Without knowing where you’re off to next, I can’t really direct you as to what we need … nor have we queried the Orb to find out anything specific. We are compiling a database of dangerous items. We’ll give you access so you can see what we’re talking about. Hopefully, we’ll have a preliminary list before you leave. In case you need some incentive.”

“No, sir. I understand the importance of keeping weapons out of enemy hands. That’s why we attacked when we should’ve come home. Giving them another Orb would’ve been a terrible idea.”

“Totally agree.” Beaumont smiled. “Again, fantastic job, Senior Agent Alexander. Good luck with your next meeting.” He stood up. “Oh, and ensure you have something to eat. You look terribly pale. Don’t want to be ill, after all. You’ve got a long year ahead of you.”

No, I certainly don't. "I'll do that, sir."
"Um … ah! Dismissed." Beaumont shook his head. "I always forget that part. See you next time and good luck."
Cassie disembarked and headed for the door. Before she was half way across the open floor, people began to pour back into the area, returning to work. The shuttle closed up and left, the roar of the engines causing her to clap her hands on her ears. As she reached the door, the place was back to normal, a bustling work area driving traffic through Gamma Alpha.
Incredible. Cassie sighed as she went about the rest of her day. The next meeting would be with the admiral and others, but she had time to get some food and relax. Considering the news she just received, she needed one but didn't have the stomach for the other. Nevertheless, she made herself take both.
No point risking getting ill. As he said, there's a lot left to do.

***

Desmond arrived at the conference room early, sitting alone with his tablet for nearly fifteen minutes. Salina arrived next, followed closely by Cassie. They didn't have a chance to speak before the Admiral, Doctor Harper, Thayne and two marines showed up. The grunts remained by the door while the others sat.
"Thank you all for coming," Admiral Reach said. "Everyone in this room knows the score and what we're dealing with. It is imperative we determine what the Tol'An are up to and what our next move must be to thwart them. Doctor Harper has had the privilege of speaking to our guest, Doctor Rindala of the Pahxin. I'm hoping you've got something to share."
"Indeed," Doctor Harper replied. "First off, after speaking at length with Thayne, I believe that we have a real opportunity to create positive relations with the Pahxin people. Their culture, according to him and the records we pulled from the equipment we pulled from the attackers, appears to be benevolent. They are friendly with their neighbors and have been exploring space for some time."

“What are their military capabilities?” Reach asked.
“Considerable.” Harper turned the main screen on and displayed a massive list of vessels. “We took this from the Tol’An. Apparently, they’d been keeping tabs on their people and this is just a fraction of what we know. They have had a long time to build this force up and we are going to be in a difficult negotiation position depending on how we go about it.”
“Understood.” Reach sighed. “What is the recommendation?”
Thayne spoke up, “I believe that your people have several bargaining chips that will make for a positive first conversation. First off, you prevented the Tol’An from succeeding twice. That will be impressive to our leaders. However, with two Trin … er … Orbs, you may be in a situation where they would like one of them. After all, theirs has been stolen.”
Reach frowned. “And we couldn’t do much to stop them. Would they take it?”
“I’ve seen our government do some incredible things,” Thayne replied. “But I believe they would rather have a positive impression. Just know that it could come up as part of the conversation and be something you will need to be prepared for. Considering our people lost ours and you did not, there’s a good argument for you keeping them safe.”
“We should send a communication,” Harper said. “Get the dialogue started as soon as possible. We need allies against this other culture and I think we’ve found our first good bet.”
“Fair enough. I’ll run that up the pole.” Reach returned his attention to the computer in front of him. “The next order of business is that I’d like to talk about what happened to Agent Alexander. This says something about a waking vision?”
“Yes, sir.” Cassie nodded but Thayne jumped in.
“She may have discovered the ancient way to interface with the Orb. We have the parameters to repeat the experiment but wisely, the scientists here are running more simulations before doing so again.”
“Good.” Reach hummed. “Do you think this vision had anything meaningful?”
Harper said, “It could have to do with why the Tol’An are trying to

acquire the Orbs. We have discovered that they believe a plague wiped out several cultures. Bringing the technology together, in their opinion, would allow them to build a defense against it … should it return. And they genuinely think it will."
"I don't know," Cassie said. "If my vision has to do with what they're worried about, it felt more like war … or a natural disaster than any sort of plague. Maybe it's not an illness in the way we think of it. Maybe it infects the planetary body itself but somehow, the people in my vision knew they were in danger and were trying to flee."
"I see." Reach considered his computer for a long moment without saying anything. He looked particularly old for a moment before turning back to Harper. "It seems to me we need to better understand the fears of our enemy. We need to know what happened. If it comes back, we may have to deal with it ourselves."
Harper nodded. "Agreed. Thayne has some ideas about that."
"There are many vacant worlds out in the cosmos, many livable," Thayne explained. "However, they are dangerous. They hold weapons far worse than the automated defenses you contended with before."
"What do you propose?" Desmond asked. "To just go to these places and hope we discover something?"
"Not at all," Thayne said. "Much as you are all prepared for the exploration adventure of a lifetime, it would take far too long. Leaving without direction will not get us to our goal. We need an expert. Someone versed in what you call 'archaeology'. Stellar archaeology in fact."
"You're not an expert?" Cassie asked.
"I'm more of what you would call an engineer specializing in the technology of the Orbs. No, we need someone who understands the planets we need to visit. Someone who can direct us to the most likely areas with clues that we need so we can trace them to some source … to understand the threat."
"How do we find such a person?" Reach asked. "They don't exist on this planet."
"I do have an acquaintance," Thayne said. "He's a bit of an … an adventurer but no one knows more about dead worlds than he does."

Salina lifted her hand. “That would force the first contact issue, wouldn’t it?”
“Oh, not at all!” Thayne shook his head emphatically. “No. He cannot go home. We have laws about such places and he defied them for the sake of science. It’s meant he’s been exiled … sort of self-imposed to avoid being detained. He lives on the frontier at a place we call Rilla. A neutral space station where many cultures meld together.”
“How far away is this place?” Desmond asked. “And how dangerous is it?”
“The way your engines are currently calibrated, it would be twelve to fifteen of your hours to get there through hyperspace.” Thayne shrugged. “Once we arrive, we’ll be able to gather Gil and plan where to go next from the safety of the station. A simple trip, really. The next part is worrisome.”
Reach’s brows lifted. “Why is that?”
“Because we have no idea where Gil will take us.” Thayne lifted a finger. “That’s my colleague’s name, by the way. Doctor Gil Vaedra.”
Reach turned to Desmond. “What do you think?”
“It seems like our only course of action. We don’t have any other leads to follow. If we’re going to do something, this seems like what it should be.”
“Lieutenant?” Reach directed the question to Salina. “Thoughts?”
“Visiting other worlds is what the Gnosis was built for,” Salina replied. “I think that we’re ready for that part. Even if it turns out to be a little dangerous, we’ve proven ourselves capable of defending ourselves.”
Reach pointed at Cassie.
“The AIA fully supports our entrance into galactic affairs and I have total confidence in the crew of the Gnosis to take this assignment on and come home alive.”
“And Doctor Harper,” Reach said, “I assume you agree?”
“I do. We are at a turning point for human history where we have to rush forward to catch up with those around us. I’m not sure we’re used to that as a species so it will be a challenge … one I’m certain we can overcome.” Harper’s expression turned grave. “Especially if we learn when to flex our muscles and when to talk.”

“We’re fast studies,” Desmond said. “Admiral, how long will it take to get approval from high command for the mission?”
“They’ve granted me command authority over the Gnosis,” Reach replied. “I do not have to get permission for another mission at this time. I’d like to think it was because we were so successful, but I suspect the AIA might be behind it.” He turned to Cassie. “Care to comment?”
“If they did apply some pressure, they didn’t tell me about it.”
“Fair enough.” Reach stood. “Let’s adjourn for the evening. Tomorrow, start prepping the ship for the journey. Looks like Doctor Rindala will be accompanying you so we should get him some personals taken care of. Harper will help. The rest of you go about your business and Godspeed. I expect launch inside of five days.”
***

Desmond gave Vincent a quick update on the plans and let him know to remind the crew to keep everything they knew under wraps. They were allowed to disembark to visit family and friends but needed to be back aboard in two days. He knew they’d be subjected to dozens of questions, but they really couldn’t talk about their trip.
Especially in regards to the aliens. Earth knew the Gnosis left the solar system, but they didn’t know why. The official reports suggested it was an extension of their maiden voyage. Conspiracy theorists somehow picked up chatter about the attack but had no proof. This put the soldiers in a difficult situation of knowing the truth and having to keep it quiet.
Part of him wanted to keep the crew aboard in an effort to help them keep quiet but considering they were about to leave again, they may not have a chance to speak with their loved ones again for quite some time. Coupled with the fact he still had to report on the deaths of some of their people, he couldn’t hold them hostage on the eve of another big trip.
Desmond leaned back on his bed, allowing his muscles to relax after a day of tension. He felt sleep threaten to take him but a knock on the door jostled him fully awake. It took a second tap to get him off the

bed and he felt somewhat thankful. He didn't want to pass out in his clothes.

I think the day's been uncomfortable enough without adding that particular misery.

He opened the door, stepping back as Cassie smiled at him. "Sorry to bother you so late. I hoped we could have a quick talk."

"Come in," Desmond gestured and let the door close behind her. "I'd offer you something, but I think all I've got in this room is water."

"I'm fine." Cassie paced over to the window and peered out. "I … met with the AIA today."

"So I imagined. I'm guessing it wasn't a pleasant conversation?"

"That depends on what you're hoping for." Cassie sighed. "Our mission together went very well in my opinion. I believe in your leadership and the crew we were working with. Everyone aboard did a fantastic job."

"I'm not sure I like where this is leading," Desmond said. He grabbed a bottle of water and took a sip. "What's up?"

"The AIA pulled a string. I have an authorization code." Cassie turned and looked him, brows raised. "It would grant me operational command of the Gnosis."

"Oh?" Desmond stiffened but tried not to show it. "For what purpose?"

"Situational … but apparently, they know about the artifacts that Thayne talked about. Some of them are dangerous enough to be targets of opportunity. If for some reason you don't go after them when there's a reasonable amount of risk, I'm to exert that authority and ensure we claim them."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because there's one thing I learned aboard the ship when we were on our mission, probably the most important thing for a civilian to see and realize." Cassie took a step forward. "When a crew is together with only each other to rely on for their lives, they must trust one another. There's no choice. Secrets like this have no place aboard a starship."

"I admit it would've been pretty annoying if you pulled the card while

we were in the middle of something." Desmond tilted his head. "Won't your bosses be upset that you let me know? I could report it to Reach."
"I don't think you will." Cassie shrugged. "I figure this can be the trust between you and I."
"Tell me about your obligations to the AIA. If I advise that we are in no position to do one of these … assignments, then are you going to trust me?"
"Of course. You're the expert and I told them that. They're going to agree with my judgement. I won't burn you, Desmond. Certainly not after what I saw out there. This is your arena. I'm here to help and observe. If I need to make a suggestion, then I will but this authorization code … It isn't going to be used."
"Then I suppose I'll keep it to myself." Desmond took a step closer, meeting her eyes. "But please know that with this trust comes a fair warning. If you use that leverage for some AIA cause, it won't go well for us. I'd rather us be partners than ever find ourselves in a situation where you have to force me to do something."
"Fully understood." Cassie extended her hand. "Shake on it?"
Desmond finally grinned. "Sure." They shook hands. "Now get out of here. I'm exhausted and want to sleep in some regular gravity for a change."
"I'll see you tomorrow, sir. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me."
"Any time." Desmond escorted her to the door and saw her out, leaning against the wall after she left. The AIA proved to once again be the boogie men everyone talked about. Playing games like that was dangerous. Cassie hadn't even been in space twice yet and they had handed her the keys to the ship.
Maybe they know what they're doing but this course of action seems insane to me. Too bad they never fill anyone in on the whole picture. I guess that would be too trusting. Lucky for me, Cassie hasn't fully embraced their games. Otherwise, the moment she used that code would've been an interesting day.
Desmond changed and crawled into bed. Scheming and trips to foreign space stations could wait until the morning. For the moment,

he wanted to lose himself in some much-needed rest. All the problems of the universe would happily wait for him at the door. Until then, they could definitely wait.

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Chapter 3

Desmond returned to the Gnosis two days later and found that the entire crew had also come back from their shore leave. Everyone went through the medical center to receive an inoculation based on the concept that the Pahxin attackers used, a universal shot that would protect them against foreign illnesses. After receiving his, Desmond went to the bridge.

Vincent worked with Zach and Salina as they plotted their course. Thayne gave them the coordinates and they simply had to do the predictive analysis before plunging into hyperspace. The captain took his seat and looked over the reports, noting that all departments reported as ready to depart. They'd leave Earth orbit in a half hour to get under way.

They'd replaced their damaged fighters, restocked their supplies and brought on additional personnel to make up the deficit. Thayne received quarters and would work closely with Nathaniel on theoretics to improve their hyperspace engines. They'd fill up as much of the fifteen hours with useful activities as they could.

"Alright, course locked," Zach said. "We're ready to depart."

"Do we have clearance for departure?" Desmond asked Salina.

"Affirmative," she replied. "The path is clear and we're good to go."

"Take us out and push for a safe departure distance." Desmond sat back, feeling far more confident in their trip this time. There were still some nerves, touching the back of his neck, but those were likely jitters of plunging into the unknown, visiting something completely new. They were once again about to make history.

Everything we do will be the first time for a while. I doubt it'll ever become old hat. If anyone on board doesn't feel the weight of responsibility for our actions, they really know how to compartmentalize their feelings.

Eventually, they would meet the Pahxin who were not terrorists. That contact would be huge. Another culture, a spacefaring species who roamed the galaxy for years, could potentially mentor humanity.

Providing they played the negotiation game properly, they could become fast friends. But hoping for an easy transition to that would be naive.

The station required a docking fee, which Thayne stated would be simple enough to pay. It seemed the facility always accepted silver, so they brought half a ton with them to receive docking clearance. They had to keep the station going somehow and without government taxes, making people pay to land there seemed like the next best thing.

Desmond busied himself with fuel statistics and energy output. He read through the different things engineering was doing to mitigate the random shutdown of systems after a hyperspace launch. The whole ship bustled as they prepared to depart their solar system once again. Hopefully, they wouldn't find themselves in the heart of another battle.

After all, the space station was supposed to be neutral. Surely, there wouldn't be any trouble at such a location.

I wish I could believe there wouldn't be any. Here's to hoping it's manageable as opposed to nonexistent. That seems like the responsible way to approach this.

***

Cassie spent several hours going over the data she collected from hacking into the Tol'An ships. When she heard they were emerging in five minutes, it caught her off guard. She had no idea she'd become so engaged in her activities. Closing down her apps, she turned in her chair to watch the view screen.

She desperately wanted to see the foreign space station, to see how it was built and what it looked like out there, so far from Earth. Did they follow any semblance of human architecture or would it be totally foreign to them? Had the aliens adopted some sort of organic looking technology? Thayne could've told her, but she wanted to be surprised. One of the best reasons to leave the Earth was to find new and interesting things. Seeing them first hand beat being told every time.

If I'm going to be an explorer, damn it, then I want the benefits of awe. We deserve that much for what we're doing out here. Take your rewards where you can get them.

"Emerging." Zach announced just before they disengaged the hyperspace engines. The ship's lights didn't dim this time and the ship hummed down to regular operational noises in short order. Cassie held her breath, waiting to hear what rebooted but no one said anything right away. Salina finally spoke up.

"We have arrived at our destination and I'm putting the space station up for view."

The screen came alive and they saw the monolithic structure of the space station Rilla. It towered over the largest structure mankind built in space with innumerable floors and expansions. A ring surrounded what must've been the center and it turned in place. Long arms went off in various directions, linked up to spheres.

At the top and bottom, the largest modules were connected by a massive cylinder bisected by the moving ring. Dozens of ships were docked all around the place, each one held fast by magnetic arms allowing access. Salina sounded off that the place had human safe air and that they would not need to wear environmental suits.

"We're also being hailed," Salina added.

"Patch them through and engage the translator," Desmond said. Cassie worked with Thayne on their way to ensure they had the proper protocols to communicate with those who ran the place. They were Pahxin but the dialect required them to tweak their modules.

"Greetings. My name is Captain Desmond Bradford of the Earth ship Gnosis. We need docking clearance, over."

The translation software took a moment to convey the message and another few seconds to provide the answer. "Welcome, Gnosis. Do you understand the fee?"

"We do, and we have half a ton of silver to impart."

"Sufficient," came the reply. "Proceed to docking bay seventy-three. Follow the beacon. We will receive your cargo and you'll be free to use our services. Thank you for coming to Rilla."

Desmond turned to the others. "Looks like we're in. Zach, do you

know what beacon they're talking about?"
"Yes, sir. I've got a lock and am closing in now. ETA … six minutes."
"That gives us some time." Desmond turned to Vincent. "Boarding party will consist of two marines, Agent Alexander and Doctor Rindala."
"Sir?" Cassie asked.
"AIA is all about flexibility, right?" Desmond smiled at her. "Besides, I saw your eyes bulge when you saw that space station. You want a closer look."
Cassie returned his smile and nodded. "Yes, sir."
"Good. Vincent, make sure everyone's ready to go. I want to make contact with the archaeologist as quickly as possible after paying the toll. Everyone else is on standby. This is a neutral location, folks. Let's make sure we don't tread on that with some kind of intergalactic faux pas."
Cassie and Vincent left the bridge and headed down to the security area. Her heart hammered in her chest as they went, and she had to remember to keep her breathing steady. She stayed on board the entire mission last time but this situation … this was real excitement, true adventure.
I get to see alien races up close and personal. I should be terrified but I'm too thrilled.
"You guys are going to be armed," Vincent said. "But I'm sure it goes without saying to keep it holstered unless it's absolutely necessary to shoot someone."
Cassie smirked. "I've been through some training. I've got this."
"Let the marines do the heavy lifting if something actually goes down. They're paid to do this sort of thing."
"Thank you, Vincent." Cassie was about to tease him when his tone struck her. He was genuinely concerned. His words were meant to sooth her nerves, yes, but he also was expressing worry. "I'll be fine. I promise."
"See that you are." The doors opened, and they disembarked. "We can't afford to lose a trained AIA agent … especially not on our second mission."

His statement helped offset the chance he might be expressing feelings for her but the fact he spoke up at all let the cat out of the bag. They'd worked together closely upon her arrival on the Gnosis and she definitely considered him a friend. Maybe he saw more in her, but she didn't think it was a good time to bring it up.

Especially since they didn't have time for a real conversation. Considering everything happening around us, the history we're making, the places we've visited and the battles we've fought, the idea of something as simple as interest seems almost ludicrous. What a reminder that we're still people, still human beings despite the enormity of this particular point in history.

Vincent led the way into a room where two beefy men geared up for the trip. They'd changed into civilian attire, leaving the uniforms behind. Each wore a large caliber pistol on their hip. One donned a leather jacket and the other, a black trench coat. They both looked at Cassie, then turned to the commander.

"Cassie, I'd like you to meet Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow and Sergeant Lawrence Gorman." Vincent gestured first to the leather jacket guy then to the other. They were bald with some dark stubble coming in at the tops of their heads and their faces were made up of strong jaws and squinty eyes.

They could've been related.

"We bringing her?" Heathrow asked. His gruff voice sounded like he shouted. A lot. "You sure about that?"

"She's an AIA agent," Vincent said. "I'm pretty sure she can handle herself."

"I hope so," Lawrence replied. "I don't know if we're going to have too much time for babysitting."

Cassie lifted a brow. "I know the feeling."

Heathrow laughed. "That's the spirit. Take our shit and throw it right back. You can call me Heat. I call him Gorman. Lawrence is too noble for an ass like him."

Gorman shrugged. "Truth."

"Where's the alien?" Heat asked. "He's coming too, right?"

"He'll be along shortly." Vincent shook his head. "You guys really are

rough around the edges sometimes."
"Most of it." Heat checked his firearm, dropping the magazine. "Your alien fella said these would be okay. Apparently, they've got some kind of special walls to prevent projectiles going right through them. Makes you wonder how many firefights break out there if they have to worry about such things."
"The goal here is to keep a low profile." Vincent spoke the words firmly, looking between the two men. "We don't want you shooting up some bar because of a slight."
"That's not our style," Gorman said. "If someone starts trouble, we'll finish it but believe me, we don't want to have our first visit to an alien facility involve a bunch of violence. Definitely not the best impression, right?"
"No." Thayne's voice came from behind them and he came in the other door. He was dressed down as well, wearing a pair of blue jeans and a sweater. "We want to avoid starting the trouble at Rilla, but I can assure you that if someone else pushes? We're fully within our rights to push back. Hard."
"Good to know," Vincent muttered. "Did they arm you, Doctor?"
"What, me?" Thayne looked shocked. "Of course not. Even if I were better trusted, I would not accept a weapon. I don't really know how to use them well enough to not be a danger to myself and others."
"Not hard to teach," Heat said. "Long as you point the dangerous end away from you and your buddies, you're fine."
"Uh huh." Vincent shook his head. "Alright, so the four of you are heading into the facility and going to … wherever Thayne takes you. You're VIP is a man named Doctor Gil Vaedra. Find him, allow them to have an exchange then bring him back to the ship. We'll need his help with the next phase of our assignment."
"Sounds easy enough," Heat replied. "Follow that guy until he gets to another guy then bring both guys back."
Gorman pointed at Cassie. "Why's she coming?"
"Operational support," Vincent said. "She understands Orb technology better than we do. The captain assigned her the task. Pick whatever option works best for you."

“Sounds good.”
Cassie thought of a snippy retort but held her tongue. She didn’t need to cause a bunch of animosity with these meatheads just before they went into what could potentially be a sensitive situation. She turned to Vincent instead and offered a smile. “I need to change in my room and grab my gun. I’ll meet you all at the airlock.”
“Sounds good.”
Heat called after her, “Make sure you bring something with some stopping power. The last thing we need is for you to make someone angry cause you shot them with a pellet gun.”
“Sergeant.” Vincent spoke with command authority and he started to lay into the man. Cassie got out of earshot so she didn’t hear everything he said. Apparently, the marines leaned toward the uppity side. Probably made sense for them to be considering their jobs. They went into harm’s way, dealing with conflicts most people would never think about entering.
That, plus climbing into power armor took a special kind of courage. Those men leaped out of perfectly good shuttles with nothing but retrorockets. Many of their systems were not that well tested. Yes, they’d been through some field work but under duress or other planets? Not so much.
When she read the briefing of their actions on the planet, she understood why they might be gruff. They went through a lot, dished out some punishment and managed to get the job done.
That was worth something and definitely made her feel better about going into the space station. Even if she had no intention of letting them know that.

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Heat watched Commander Bowman leave after getting chewed out for giving the agent a hard time. He turned and smirked at Gorman. “Apparently, the commander can’t take a joke, huh? You’d think he’d lighten up. She’s probably the most dangerous person on board this ship. Even if it requires her to have a computer.”

“You’d better believe it,” Gorman replied. “She’s the one I talked to about getting through the door back on that planet. She’s kind of bad ass at what she does. And while you may not know it by looking at her, I heard she went through the crazy training course the rest of those agents go through. I bet she could take us both out pretty easily.”
“You, maybe.” Heat shook his head. “I saw a scared girl who shouldn’t be on this ship. Yeah, she’s got some computer skills but what do those amount to really? When we’re down there and someone starts taking some shots, I think we’re going to be more worried about keeping our soft bits on the inside than what she can do with a terminal.”
“Unless she needs to unlock a door,” Thayne announced. “Then we’ll definitely appreciate her presence.”
“Yeah, yeah.” Heat waved his hand at him. “Haven’t seen you since the flight back up to the ship. How’ve you been, Doc?”
“A prisoner, of sorts … then a collaborator and now your fellow crew member. Sort of.” Thayne hummed. “I’ve been busy since we parted ways. We sent a message to my people and now we will attempt to solve one of the greatest mysteries of the universe. This is a very exciting time, I must say.”
Heat chuckled. “I’m sure it’ll be a blast. Come on.” He led them out toward the airlock where they were docking with the space station. “Let me ask you something. How’re we going to communicate with all these people? Not like they speak the Queen’s English. You guys got a plan for that?”
“Of course,” Thayne replied. “You see, when you board the space station, you buy translation devices. They are tied in to the station’s computer systems and allow you to understand others. Everyone wears one and they’re quite discreet. However, there is a short delay in conversations so from an observer’s point of view, they seem a bit awkward.”
“That helps,” Gorman said. “At least we’ll know when they say they’re going to kill us.”
“Sadly, it’ll be delayed by a few seconds,” Heat pointed out. “So we’ll

know because they're shooting. Somewhere around the third shot we'll hear a voice say 'die, scum'. Depending on how creative the translation device is."
Cassie waited for them at the airlock, leaning against the wall. She wore black cargo pants, combat boots and a short leather jacket over a tactical sweater. The contrast from her earlier pristine uniform gave her some more street cred. The gun on her side was no joke either, a next generation ten millimeter with an extended mag.
Maybe I was wrong about her. This getup gives her a little edge.
Vincent stood nearby, and he looked just as unhappy as when he drilled into them. "Are you ready for this? Outside this door, we won't have a lot of backup for you. We've received permission to post guards outside, but they'll be your only support if you need it. You'll have to get back here."
Heat stepped in front of the door. "If we need support in there, we're done for. Don't worry. We've got this. As much as you can when it comes to visiting some crazy ass space station out in the middle of space far beyond what any human being has even imagined."
Gorman groaned. "You have a way with words, man. Seriously."
"Just go." Vincent pointed. They opened the door and the marines led the way down the tunnel to the station proper. Whatever happened next would be an adventure to say the least but whether or not they came back from it … Heat wasn't entirely worried, but he wondered if he probably should be.

***

Cassie understood the mindset of men like Heat. She'd studied the psychology reports for soldiers throughout history and felt as if she'd gained a fair understanding of their swagger and devil-may-care attitudes. These two were good at their jobs and they risked a lot. A little salt from them made sense, even if it was annoying.
We are lucky to have them with us on this mission. If something goes down, they'll risk their lives to get us back to the Gnosis.
When the secondary airlock door opened, a rush of cool air hit them,

as if they kept the heat low. Cassie pulled a quick scan and found that the life support system was maintaining the environment at an even sixty-one degrees Fahrenheit. She was thankful she'd dressed warmly though surely the shops and restaurants would have their own heat controls.

Thayne approached the attendant waiting to meet them and they spoke in the Pahxin language. While Cassie couldn't understand it, she knew the sounds well enough to make it out. After a brief conversation, Thayne received a package and returned to the others. He offered them each a small box.

"These are your translators," he said. "Be sure to put them firmly in your dominant ear. They take a moment to calibrate so we'll do that here. Let me know when you're ready."

Cassie crammed the tiny device into her right ear and winced when it whistled once. "Um … ouch."

"Sorry about that," Thayne said. "They sometimes have feedback when you initially install them. Now, if you're all good, I'll start."

He rattled off a number of words in Pahxin and the devices quickly acclimated to the speech then translated in a remarkably natural male voice. Cassie then spoke to Thayne for several moments, just stating words until he nodded. "That will have updated their database. You'd be surprised at how powerful this technology is."

"Dude," Heat muttered. "It changes words so we can understand them. It's not exactly turning water into wine."

"Isn't it though?" Thayne asked. He turned to Cassie. "Wine is the beverage people become inebriated from, yes?"

Cassie nodded, not really wanting to be part of this particular conversation.

"Think about it, Sergeant," Thayne continued. "Communication. Without it, two sides resort to the universal conversation of violence. With it, they can build some of the most wondrous structures known to sentient beings. Believe me, the translation software used on this station is far more impressive than you know."

"Uh huh. Got it." Heat gestured down the hall. "Care to take us to your friend?"

“Yes! I’ve checked my scanner and luckily, he is here! We don’t have to wait. However, I’m detecting him at an eating establishment that inebriates people. We’ll need to be cautious there.”
“A bar,” Heat said. “You’re so keen on communication, let me help you out. We’re going to a bar.”
“It’s not a prison, Sergeant.” Thayne moved off and Cassie put her hand on Heat’s shoulder, patting him twice.
“I’d just let that one go for now,” she said. “Come on.”
Cassie expected to see more people as they walked down the hallway leaving the docking area but it was nearly vacant. A door loomed ahead, and it opened as they approached, revealing the boarding gate and a promenade of sorts. The hordes she expected went about their business out there, entering shops and heading to destinations throughout the station.
Clothing styles varied dramatically from close to what they’d expect to see on Earth to vibrant colors that clashed wildly. One man walked without a top on, his pale skin covered in short, coarse hair. Another individual walked through the area in body armor, plates of metal covering up sensitive parts.
Gorman motioned with his chin toward the man. “Looks like we wouldn’t have been out of place in the power armor.”
“But more noticeable,” Cassie replied. “This mission requires a low profile. Thayne? Which way?”
“We’ve got a ways to travel. Follow me.”
They moved off at a brisk pace, plowing into the strange crowd. Cassie kept her hands on her weapon and scanner, worrying about someone trying to lift her items. Heat and Gorman took up the middle. Walking side by side, their presence alone made it easier to travel. People moved, either inadvertently or because they saw the meatheads coming through.
They’re probably used to scary looking types plowing through here.
As if to punctuate her thought, a fight broke out to their left. Cassie’s fingers tightened about her weapon but she kept it in its holster. The combatants started throwing blows, not even trying to block or dodge. One was a tall bald humanoid with a low brow and square jaw. He

wore a leather body suit over his stocky body.
The other looked more like one of the marines but thinner with a long black ponytail. He slammed his fist into his opponent's face but it didn't even phase the target. A return blow to the torso made the thin guy grunt and so they continued, striking each other like they were conducting some sort of ritual.
"Those two belong to one of the Clans of Uri," Thayne explained. "Think of them as … hm … I suppose you would call them raiders. But they tend to be a touch more um … noble? Yes, noble. They're a noble type of criminal."
"Charming." Heat shook his head as they started moving again. "Pirates with a code."
"Precisely!" Thayne walked in silence for several minutes. "Wait. What's a pirate?"
"Focus," Cassie said. "We can talk about the hierarchy of criminals later."
Twenty minutes passed by and Cassie began to feel as if they hadn't made any progress at all. Many of the people around her were too tall to see over and it obscured her view of the different shops they passed by. While crowd watching definitely appealed to her desire to see something new, the cultures were on display in every storefront. We'll have to walk closer to them on the way back.
The translator in her ear started to become annoying as it attempted to filter through the various conversations going on around them. At first, Cassie tried to take snippets out of the mix but eventually, she had to ignore it. Broken words and phrases didn't provide any context of what was happening
"We're here!" Thayne called out. "Welcome to Videla's. Not a place I particularly like to visit but nevertheless, Gil seems to be a …" He hummed. "Oh! Regular! Sorry. I'm almost there with this English language."
"Get in there and find him," Heat said. "We've got your back."
Thayne started to say something but Cassie shook her head and gestured for the door. He nodded, though it was clear he wanted to indulge his curiosity. Slang remained beyond him. The common

phrases probably proved to simply be annoying because trying to take them literally brought one to an odd place.
He needs a class on Earth languages. Maybe we can hook him up while we're en route to our next destination.
Videla's proved that seedy bars were not solely an Earth commodity. The place smelled like stale vomit and old tires. When they stepped across the threshold, the temperature went up fifteen degrees and the humidity felt oppressive. Most of the tables were filled with different characters of varying shadiness.
Several eyes fell on them as they entered, likely trying to gauge whether they were there to cause trouble. Cassie got a sense of the room, that most of the patrons just wanted to be left alone. But there were some that sized them up, trying to decide if they might be worth taking on. Those were the ones she worried about and they were why Heat and Gorman came along.
Few people in the room looked ready to test their luck with the marines. Providing they found Gil in a hurry, they might be able to get out of there before anyone drank enough to become bold. Then again, half these people may be three sheets to the wind. Haste is probably the best option at this point.
"Where is he, Thayne?" Cassie asked. "We're on a timeline here."
"I don't know," Thayne replied. "The scanner brought me here, but I have to look around. It's a big place."
Cassie paused to look around. There were a lot of tables, but they were all visible. She started to feel like he had brought them to the wrong place when something shattered to the left. All eyes went to a table in the corner where four men were roughing up another. They'd just lifted someone from his seat and slammed him into the wall.
"Don't tell me …" Heat groaned.
"Yes, that's Gil!" Thayne said. "Up to his normal routine I see."
"Getting his ass beat?" Gorman asked.
"If that means assaulted, yes."
Cassie sighed. "We have to stop this."
"It probably won't go well," Gorman replied. "But I think we've got those guys. Heat?"

“Come on. We’ll save him.”
Gil’s attackers were not small men but the tallest of them might’ve come up to Heat’s chin. They had numbers but not necessarily intimidation value. Of course, Gil himself was a slight individual that looked a lot like Thayne only he wore a sparse black beard and a filthy trench coat that might’ve been black at one point but looked brown.
His dark hair stood up in the front and sides, glistening from not being washed in sometime. Not at all what I expected, Cassie thought. The way Thayne spoke of the man put a vision of some golden age treasure hunter in her mind. A dashing fellow, attractive even, ready to take on any challenge that might befall him.
The thugs surrounding Gil made it pretty clear he’d met his match.
“Diplomacy?” Gorman asked Heat as they walked.
“Yeah, I’m a friendly guy.” Heat side stepped between two chairs and moved with a purpose, fists clenched. One of the thugs punched Gil in the gut, drawing a wince of pain. They turned just as the marines arrived and started speaking in another language. The words began to translate in Cassie’s ear when Heat pummeled the closest man in the face. “Hi there.”
The finished comment from the tormentors came out as what do you fools want? She wondered how quickly Heat’s greeting would be converted. They freed Gil and turned to deal with the new threat. Their friend remained on the ground, unconscious. Music stopped in the bar and people stood up.
“Hello, Gil!” Thayne called out in English. He paused and spoke again in Pahxin.
“Greetings,” Gil replied, his words translated almost in real time. Pahxin must’ve been fairly common. He stumbled over to his friend and stood behind him, looking back at the attackers. “They were going to kill me.” The criminal who hit him rattled off a comment, glaring at Heat. He reached for his side.
“He said he plans on killing us now too!” Thayne cried in English. Heat drew his pistol and pressed it against the man’s forehead. “You sure about that?”

Gorman followed suit, aiming at one of the others.
“We just want to leave,” Heat said. “No one has to die today. Just let us walk out of here. You can save your grudge for another day. Just chalk this up to bad luck, huh?”
They waited for the translation, exchanging furtive looks with one another. It seemed they might actually take Heat up on the offer when a table toppled behind them and two men began to argue violently. One drew a pistol and shot the other in the chest. The body hit the ground and the moment it touched the floor, chaos reigned.
Heat’s target battered his gun out of the way and tried to tackle him. His shoulder slammed into the marine’s gut but the man didn’t move. Instead, he brought the butt of his weapon down on the man’s back with enough force to crack bone. He crumpled to the ground as his companions went for their guns.
Gorman shot one in the head. The other dove for cover. Cassie drew her weapon and motioned for Thayne and Gil to move. She herded them toward the door as a full brawl broke out. Weapons went off, people threw chairs and glass shattered. The waitstaff took cover behind the bar, seemingly prepared to wait out the violence.
“Move!” Cassie shouted. “Hurry up!”
A tall man grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. She punched him in the throat and as he loosened his grip, she writhed free and gave him a thrust kick to the stomach. He fell backwards onto a table and rolled off. When she turned back to her charges, they’d made it to the door. Cursing, she rushed to catch up.
Heat and Gorman were a good ten feet behind, firing their weapons. The brawl escalated until no one fought hand to hand anymore. They were drawing rifles and other projectiles, shooting at each other as the entire place turned into a war zone with a dozen sides in the conflict.
Thayne and Gil took a right as soon as they left, and Cassie caught up a moment later. She whacked Thayne. “You can’t leave me, you’re unarmed!”
“You said to go!” Thayne protested. “So we went! Besides, I’m fairly sure Gil is armed.”
“Lovely,” Cassie sighed. “It didn’t do him a lot of good!”

Gil rattled something off and Thayne translated. “There are more of the Kalrawv after us. They’re just down the corridor.”
“What?” Cassie glanced over her shoulder. “I don’t see—”
A gunshot rang out, making the crowd immediately part. More weapons came out and people prepared for whatever violence was on the verge of breaking out. Heat caught up first, glancing over his shoulder. “What was that?”
“The next part of this adventure,” Cassie replied. “We’ve got some kind of group after the archaeologist here and those guys in the bar must’ve called some friends.”
Gorman nodded. “If we hurry, we can be back in the ship in ten minutes. Especially taking advantage of the clear halls.”
“Let’s do it.” Heat grabbed Thayne’s arm. “You stick with us. Tell your buddy he’s with Cassie. We’re all getting out of here, but you have to stay close. Got it?”
Thayne nodded. “We’re ready to go, Sergeant. Just lead the way.”
“Always do,” Heat muttered. A shot hit the wall near his head and he sighed. “Come on, guys. Nothing’s ever easy.”

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Chapter 4

Heat returned fire on their attackers, catching one in the chest. They'd started moving quickly but he let the scientists run ahead of him. Their pursuers, roughly ten of them, were proceeding with some level of caution for their own safety but they didn't seem concerned with bystanders. Their rogue shots caught at least two civilians that Heat noticed.

That'll turn this station on them quick.

"Front!" Gorman shouted, firing his weapon. A man dropped to the ground, his rifle skittering away from him. Heat didn't have time to question the shot. They rounded a bend, giving themselves a brief reprieve from the Kalrawv or whatever they were called. He wondered briefly how an archaeologist ended up with a bunch of thugs.

But the answer to that question really didn't matter at that moment. Isn't there some kind of station security? Thayne had described the place as seedy. Maybe people made their own law there. A spray of bullets nearly caught him in the chest and he had to take cover in a doorway. "Get them down!" Heat shouted, and Gorman brought the two VIPs to the floor. Cassie took cover across from him, meeting his eyes.

"They might not have specifically been shooting at us," Cassie yelled to him.

"Doesn't matter now," Heat replied. "Watch our backs."

He glanced out and saw four men with rifles taking shots at different people, blasting those who weren't quick enough to get to safety. They're doing this for sport. The idea pissed him off, but he remained calm. They stood behind some waist high cover, what appeared to be some kind of vending machine. None of them crouched, giving him plenty to aim at.

Heat fired at the one in the middle, catching him in the forehead. Gorman followed suit, shooting the one on the left. The third one dropped low behind his cover just as the Kalrawv agents came bursting around the corner.

Cassie fired her weapons several times and Heat watched as one dropped and the others scurried to get behind anything. One grabbed a person who was covering on the ground, hoisting them up for a human shield. The others took positions in stores, their weapons aimed down the hall.

“We can’t afford a standstill,” Heat shouted. “We have got to keep moving! The ship isn’t going to be able to send us any backup.”

“Cover us,” Gorman shouted. “I’ll get these guys moving again if you lay down some fire.”

“You ready?” Heat asked Cassie. She checked her magazine and nodded. “Go!”

They leaned out and started firing, suppressing the enemies. The only one Heat worried about was the jerk who took a hostage. He aimed around his protection, ready to take a shot the moment the others became visible. Heat aimed and fired at his hand, grazing his wrist instead. The hostage elbowed him and ran.

Cassie took the shot and finished him off before he could even nurse his injury.

Gorman stood and got the VIPs moving. They started to run. The Kalrawv became bold and two of them stepped out, firing wildly at Cassie. She ducked back into her cover, but Heat was able to blast them both. He dislodged his magazine, crammed it into his pocket and loaded another.

A bullet slammed into the wall beside him, grazing his jacket. The heat from the attack burned him but he knew he hadn’t actually been shot. The wound was superficial at best, but it still set off a warning in his head. He pressed himself further into the cover, contemplating their next move.

Without the scanner from his power armor helmet, he didn’t know exactly how many men they faced. Furthermore, the Kalrawv weren’t the only threat, they just happened to be the overt one. Other station visitors got in on the action and even as he wondered what to do, he heard Gorman’s weapon barking down the hall. We have to catch up.

Cassie leaned into her cover, using her computer. He wondered what she might be up to. They were standing in the doorways of closed-up

shops. They didn't have any windows to break so the only way to go was out into the hallway, which had turned into a shooting gallery. People on both sides fired at each other, and probably didn't even know why.

I'm sure someone got shot who was totally innocent in this, Heat thought. I'd probably take some shots too.

Heat was leaning against his door when it suddenly opened, causing him to stumble into the shop. He looked back at Cassie and saw she'd entered her shop as well. Jesus, she really did unlock a door! She gestured in the direction of where Gorman and the others ran before disappearing deeper into the room.

He obeyed, moving quickly through a place that seemed to sell clothes. The racks were all pressed against the walls and the middle was wide open. He found an ajar door and burst through, hurrying down a hallway to another door. Slapping the panel did nothing. It was locked and seemed to require a key.

An alarm went off overhead. Great, they rigged this place and I probably just turned that thing on. Not that it matters. I doubt anyone's going to notice over the gunfire and screams out in the hallway.

The door slid open and Cassie was standing nearby, leaning against a pillar for cover. She waved at him three times and he took a quick look up and down the hall before rushing over to her. The fighting seemed to be behind them now, but Gorman's weapon continued to discharge every few moments.

"Clever," Heat said. "I'm glad you're here."

"I thought you might be," Cassie replied. "We need to go but I checked the scans. There are a lot of hostiles up there and Gorman's alone."

"How far is he to the ship?"

"The guards have to be hearing what's going on," Cassie hummed. "Wait!" She got on the com. "Gnosis, please come in. We're incoming with the VIPs and need the guards to meet us at the loading gate, over."

"This is the Gnosis." Salina's voice filled her ear. "I'll let them know. Is

everything okay?"
"No, not really. Please hurry!" Cassie turned to Heat. "We'd better go too."
"They'll be closing in behind us soon." Heat broke into a run. "Keep up! This is going to be a serious dash!"

***

Movement drew Gorman's attention to the left as a man peered through a window, leveling a rifle in their direction. He snapped off a shot, crossbody and met his target in the left shoulder. The figure disappeared but the marine didn't have time to enjoy the momentary victory.
Shots fired from the right drove him and his VIPs to the opposite side of the corridor where they took cover in a closed shop's doorway. Gorman risked a glance and saw three people advancing on them, guns aimed. What the hell do these guys want? He blind-fired three times and glanced again.
The newcomers scattered but they continued to advance. Gorman prepared himself to go out there and confront them when automatic weapon-fire exploded from that direction. A massive firefight broke out between two sides and the noise subsided in a few seconds. Thayne's wide eyes stared at him as he trembled in cover.
"I know, buddy." Gorman sighed, taking a look. The three men who had advanced on them were dead and a couple guys now hovered over the first body, looting him. That's just amazing. They were armed with small weapons, but he knew they could throw out some serious firepower. He took aim and shot the first one in the side of the head. His buddy looked in their direction, but he didn't have time to take a shot before Gorman finished him too. "Move!" Gorman shouted. "Go! Go! Go!"
Thayne and Gil rushed out from the doorway with Gorman close behind. More shooting started behind him and he hoped that Cassie and Heat were doing alright. Without VIPs to worry about, they had a distinct advantage over him. Of course, they might be facing the brunt

of the Kalrawv which meant a better organized bunch.
Gil shouted, diving to the ground and taking Thayne with him. Gorman scanned the area to see what made him hit the deck, moving to the left at the same time. The sudden motion may well have saved his life as something connected just below the surface of his left arm and cleanly exited out the back.
Dropping to his knee, Gorman lifted his weapon and saw his attacker. The man leaned against some kind of kiosk, desperately working the lever of his weapon. Gorman shot him three times, twice in the chest and once in the face.
Glancing at his own wound, blood soaked his jacket and the surface of his skin went numb. “Come on,” he grumbled. “He’s down.” He saw the entry up ahead which led to the Gnosis. They were less than a hundred yards away. The once busy loading gate was totally vacant now.
Gunfire really cleared an area.
Heat shouted behind him, “Friendlies approaching!” Gorman glanced back to see his allies hurrying up on him. “And we’ve got company!”
Cassie turned while running, firing a couple of shots behind her. Someone briefly appeared around the bend of the corridor and dashed backward to avoid being hit. They leaned out from their partial cover, firing several rounds at the fleeing humans. Gorman tried to lay down some cover fire but the enemies weren’t deterred.
Thayne and Gil made it through the landing area and into the docking ring for the Gnosis. Heat, Cassie and Gorman were a short dash away. They picked up the pace, sprinting as their pursuers came after them. The enemies had a clear line of fire into their backs, but they didn’t seem to be taking advantage of it.
They wanted to close the distance, to put them down for good.
Gorman’s vision tunneled as he pushed himself hard. The door loomed ahead. Weapons started barking behind him. He readied himself for the inevitable burning, the shocking pain of being hit. He knew the sensation too well having been shot before. Part of him wanted to just turn and finish the fight facing the enemies.
As he considered the possibility, four other marines burst through the

door and opened fire. Cassie made it to them first, hurrying through to the next area and the safety of cover. Heat shoved Gorman hard, making him take the lead. He made it past his colleagues and spun, taking aim to help.

Heat joined him, and they started blasting away at the Kalrawv troops still daring to exchange fire with them. Gorman counted nearly ten of them. Lord, I had no idea they were so hot for this guy! The marines made short work of their front lines, tearing through several of them before the remaining four fled.

"Cease fire!" Heat shouted. "Get back to the Gnosis!"

"Damn it!" One of the others cried out. "I was hit. Bastard got me in the arm."

"Get to medical," Heat ordered. "Looks like you get to go too, Gorman."

"What about you?" Gorman asked. "You didn't snag that coat during the run."

"Just a burn. I'll be fine. You're bleeding."

"Maybe we should all stop in at medical," Cassie suggested. "Just to be sure. God knows what we potentially picked up in this place."

"You're a barrel of hope," Heat said. "But she's not wrong. Alright, everyone. Let's move out. This op's complete though it definitely goes to show you shouldn't think anything's going to be easy."

"Nothing is," Gorman muttered. "Nothing ever is."

***

Desmond expected a complaint from some sort of station administration after the incident at Rilla but none came. They weren't even required to immediately leave. The verbal report he received from the marine guards stated there was a full-on shootout with the locals. Dozens were confirmed dead.

And we didn't hear anything about it from the control center. That seems damn peculiar.

Thayne warned them of the place's seedy reputation, but this went above and beyond. It truly was a frontier, the intergalactic wild west.

Without actual authorities enforcing any laws, it shouldn't have been surprising that such violence could occur without anyone really caring. They probably only bothered a ship with reparations if their crew damaged the structure.

Bodies themselves are easy enough to recycle, I suppose.

Desmond and Vincent headed down to the medical bay where they intended to speak with Thayne and his friend, Doctor Gil Vaedra. Hopefully, the man could tell them what they needed to know and wasn't too traumatized from his experience. Somehow, it seemed likely he was used to being in trouble.

Considering where they found the man, it seemed likely he ran afoul of bad people often. After all, Thayne called him an adventurer. Those types rarely managed to get through life easily. With risk came reward … and often serious trouble.

Desmond locked down the area leading to the ship and manned the airlock with a dozen guards. If anyone decided to assault the ship, they'd have to go down a narrow corridor without any cover, right into the direct fire of several armed men. It should give them time to question Gil and decide if he was coming with them or staying there. After he was grabbed by those criminals, something told Desmond the good archaeologist would like a chance to get out of the system for a while. The Gnosis represented a convenient escape route, a method for him to leave with a sufficiently potent force to keep him alive.

The elevator door opened and Desmond led the way, pausing in front of the medical bay door. Two marines stood guard and they snapped to attention as he approached. "At ease," he said. "Everything okay down here?"

"Yes, sir," the man on the right replied. "Everyone's keeping cool."

"Excellent." Desmond stepped in and several sets of eyes fell upon him. "Hello, everyone. Seems you all had a rather exciting time on our first visit to an alien facility."

"Sorry about that, sir," Heat said. A nurse was tending to a wound on his arm. "Doctor Vaedra was being assaulted and we stepped in. The guys who wanted him were … determined to keep hold of him."

"I see." Desmond hummed. He looked at Gorman. "How bad is your

wound?"
"Clean exit on the surface," Gorman replied. "I'm still combat operational."
Doctor Holland stood nearby while Doctor Sandra Berg, his assistant, wrapped it with a bandage. He shook his head. "These men have a strange opinion on what is operational. That's a pretty nasty cut and he's damn lucky it wasn't an inch closer. It would've done some real damage."
"What's your prognosis?" Desmond asked. "Will he be off duty for a while?"
"I'm recommending it," Holland said. "Though I'm sure we're too busy to keep him off his feet for long enough."
"We'll see." Desmond looked at the marines. Their attendants stepped back. "If you're done, you're dismissed. Get some food and relax. You're off duty until further notice."
Both men stood and offered a salute. "Yes, sir." They spoke in unison and departed. Thayne drank deeply from a bottle of water and the other man, Doctor Gil Vaedra, stared into space. He looked exhausted, with dark hair sticking up here and there. A sparse beard graced his cheeks and chin, his eyes sunken.
"Was their assessment accurate?" Vincent asked Cassie. "Did you guys have to get involved the way you did?"
Cassie nodded. "They were about to beat him. We stepped in and the shooting started after the brawl. We were in a running battle through the station back to the ship. Honestly, it's a miracle we made it back with the minor injuries we had."
Vincent didn't seem convinced, but he didn't push. Desmond pulled a chair up and turned to Thayne. "So, we've got the archaeologist and I'm pretty sure we're on borrowed time here now. Whoever was after your friend might want him bad enough to attack us so we should figure out what we're doing as soon as possible."
"Of course." Thayne offered him an ear piece then handed one to Vincent. They stuffed them into their right ears. "This will allow you to speak freely." He turned to his friend. "Gil, this is Captain Desmond Bradford and Commander Vincent Bowman. They are from Earth."

“Oh my …” The masculine voice in Desmond’s ear spoke at just a half second off from Gil’s odd, foreign speech. “I know that planet. The people there have advanced considerably. I trust they found a Trindisha?”
Thayne nodded. “Indeed, and put it to good use, wouldn’t you say?”
“Especially since they just saved my life. Thank you all … very much for what you’ve done. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it.”
“Think nothing of it,” Desmond replied. “We’re on a time crunch and we need your help. We’re looking for something and honestly, at this point I’d be happy to take you along. Are you in a position where you can leave this place?”
“Of course,” Gil said. “If I do not, they will surely kill me. I have everything I own with me. We can leave as soon as you’re ready. Anything you need, if I can provide it, I shall do so. We should simply get far away from here … or at least away from the station. In the event that Kalrawv Group decides to try to kill me on board your vessel.”
“We’ve got the area guarded …” Desmond sighed. “Vincent, pull the marines back aboard the ship and have Zach get clearance to leave. I want us out and moving toward an exit vector ASAP.”
“Yes, sir.” Vincent nodded and left the room. Desmond returned his attention to Gil.
“Thayne tells us you’re an expert on dead worlds … ancient civilizations.” Desmond leaned forward. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but the Tol’An are trying to pull together technology to fend off a plague. Something they believe wiped out several of these worlds. We’re investigating it to see how credible the threat is … to find out what’s motivating them to attack other planets.”
“They attacked Earth,” Thayne added. “And they kidnapped me. These people liberated me from them.”
“I see.” Gil frowned. “It does not surprise me to hear they have taken such extreme actions. They are far from subtle. Yet they may not be incorrect. I have seen evidence that suggest there may have been … some event that destroyed many worlds. My most recent studies discovered the potential in one such place.”

“What were you researching?” Thayne asked. “And why were they after you?”
“The Kalrawv Group is a business, a shady one at least. They funded my research … provided protection on the world I was excavating.”
Gil cleared his throat. “The information I found involved an old power regulation formula, something which could easily revolutionize the reactors on many of our ships.”
“Except?” Thayne prompted.
“Well … it’s volatile,” Gil explained. “We would need to do extensive research to make it safe. But in its current state, it would make volatile and potent bombs. This is the information they hoped to sell. When they told me, I ran. Stole one of their shuttles and came back here to get transport out of the system.”
“Why’d you come here?” Cassie asked. “Obviously they came looking for you.”
“They were faster than I anticipated,” Gil replied. “A friend of mine had been here but I missed him by a short while. He was on a trading run to an outer system. It would’ve given me plenty of time to think of how to get out of my mess. As I frantically tried to find an alternative, they caught up with me … and luckily, so did you.”
“Lucky indeed.” Thayne nodded sagely.
“You know …” Gil held up a finger. “As I think of it, the world I was on may well help us with your problem. I uncovered the archives and the power formula was one of the first things I uncovered. Before I could delve deeper, they were talking about selling to wicked characters all over the galaxy … terrorists.”
“What are you saying?” Desmond asked.
“I’m certain that world was impacted by the threat you are investigating. Their archives may have some information relating to it. Something that could help us understand … maybe lead us to additional clues. I have the coordinates in my computer and we could be there in a few short hours. Obviously, since a small shuttle was able to jump here from there.”
Vincent’s voice broke over the com, “Attention all hands. Brace for departure. We are detaching from dock in ten seconds. All hands

prepare for departure."
Desmond rubbed his chin. "You said you needed protection on that world. From what?"
"The population," Gil said. "They … have been altered by whatever event devastated their world. They are now clans of beasts, mutated humanoids with great strength and a desire for flesh. A Pahxin research crew visited there and declared the place forbidden when two of their members were devoured."
Cassie's eyes widened. "Devoured? Good God."
Thayne nodded. "We tend to be cautious about such things. I'm sure the scientific council believed there were other places we could acquire similar information without the risk."
"What kind of weapons did they have?" Desmond asked. "These … things that ate your people."
"Oh, they're sentient enough to use firearms," Gil replied. "They present a credible threat, especially when our own weapons were not enough to kill them easily. The Kalrawv lost a few of their number as well, even after putting many bullets into our attackers. It should be said this will not be easy."
"I'm gathering that." Desmond frowned, turning away. When they left Earth, he had a feeling they'd be dealing with something requiring a military application. The automated defenses of their previous encounter made him err on the side of caution. If they planned for trouble and didn't find it, so much the better.
"We have another problem," Gil added. "The facility we're after is considered sacred by those living there. We were likely attacked because they thought we were desecrating it. Furthermore, the environment isn't the most pleasant. The weather can be … mercurial to say the least."
"And the hits keep on coming," Desmond muttered. "Okay, so if it's going to take a few hours to get there, then I recommend we use our time wisely. First, Gil will give the coordinates to Salina and Zach so they can plot a course. It'll take us a little time to get into position so we can give everyone a chance to clean up and relax."
"Then?" Cassie asked.

“During the jump,” Desmond continued, “Gil will provide us with as much detail as he can about the planet. The marines going down there will need to know. I want escorts ready so we can provide some air support if needed. We need to determine who must go down there. If we can leave non-combatants on the ship, so much the better.”
“Depending on the weather,” Gil said, “we should be able to provide support from orbit. I’ll need to see your scanning equipment.”
“It’s good,” Thayne replied. “Not optimized, but solid.”
“Excellent. Then we should be fine.” Gil sighed. “I would very much like the opportunity to clean up as you say.”
“Cassie, arrange to get him some quarters.” Desmond headed for the door and paused. “When you’re all done, connect up and we’ll meet in one of our briefing rooms. Time’s of the essence so let’s not dawdle. Especially if your friends might try to cause trouble out here before we leave the system.”

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Chapter 5

Vincent leaned over Salina's console, looking at the screen with her. They'd been in hyperspace for nearly an hour, but she had data to share from just before they left. A ship left Rilla Station and seemed to be on a pursuit course. Of course, they left before it could get too close so chances were just as good it was simply on its way to another destination.

Paranoia might pay off in this situation.

"I'm seeing their energy reading," Vincent said. "It was definitely armed but they didn't seem to be gearing up for combat."

"They were still quite a ways off," Salina replied. "Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with the signals they were sending back to the station or I might've been able to pick up their com traffic. I don't even have the designation of their vessel."

Vincent nodded. "I doubt they're coming after us and even if they are, it was a pretty small ship. I'm pretty sure we can take it. Besides, you read the preliminary briefing. We don't expect to find space craft where we're going. Just … monsters basically."

"That's a lot better." Salina smirked. "Ironic that we consider it fortunate to discover a species which eats sentient beings over a battle in orbit."

"Since you put it that way, I guess I agree." Vincent straightened up. "Nothing we can do about them now. Let's just focus on the task at hand." He returned to his seat. "Zach, get Deacon up here to relieve you. I want to make sure you have some down time before we arrive at this system."

"Got it, sir."

Cassie stepped out of the elevator and sat at her console, causing Vincent's heart to beat a little faster. He fought an urge to greet her and focused on the reports coming in from the various parts of the ship. His interest in the agent may not have been professional strictly speaking but he couldn't deny a sense of connection.

Not the time for this, Commander. Vincent drew a deep breath and

started reading. Engineering stated they were working with Thayne and Gil to boost their scanning capabilities. Simulations showed an increase of efficiency by more than forty percent. That might be enough to get through the atmospheric anomalies they expected.
The fewer people they sent to the surface the better. Marine power armor would be enough to deal with the monsters … probably … but unarmored individuals wouldn't have a lot of chance. The Pahxin researchers must've gone down without adequate protection. Vincent wished they had some better data on the creatures they'd be facing.
Gil didn't bother to scan them. He was in the middle of grabbing data from the archives and when he found the formula, he figured he was done. Based on the description of what he discovered, it had the potential to revolutionize his culture's energy demands. Planets and colonies could benefit from it, providing they solved the unstable problems.
Applying other theories to their own probably would work. We've been doing it with the Orb for years.
Vincent considered the groups they were contending with. The Tol'An were considered radicals and terrorists by the Pahxin. They genuinely wanted to cause trouble and rule according to their moral standards. If they were ever able to acquire the technology they were after, they very well might be able to.
Then there was the Kalrawv Group, which seemed to be a greedy corporation willing to make money through selling … well … anything. They probably had enough sanity to be reasoned with for the most part but if they retained the services of thugs and criminals to perform their operations, they'd be volatile to say the least.
How many more crazy factions are there out here we should be worried about?
"Commander," Cassie called out. He cleared his throat and turned slowly to acknowledge her, not wanting to seem overeager. "I'm going to reboot the tertiary internal scanners if you don't mind. They're acting a little odd. I've logged a request with Engineering to have a look."
"Go ahead," Vincent replied. "Thanks for letting me know."

Vincent knew a great deal about the Gnosis. He'd studied the ship extensively when he received his assignment, but he was shocked at how much better Cassie knew the vessel than he or even Desmond did. She had worked closely with some of the original designers during the early days of building the systems but he didn't know how much until she came aboard.

While he doubted she could fix things as efficiently as the engineers, she definitely knew how to find problems and get them highlighted for swift turnaround.

Desmond came on the bridge and took his seat. "I finished speaking with Thayne and Gil. We're not exactly flying blind here but once we arrive, we'll be playing it by ear. I'd really like some intel before we go into these situations."

"Understandable," Vincent replied. "But they are scientists, not tacticians. I'm not entirely surprised that they weren't ready with a solid briefing of what to expect."

Desmond nodded. "Doesn't make it any less annoying. I mean, Gil described the mutants. They're big, muscular and can use weapons. He suggested they must be capable of rational thought because they haven't destroyed themselves, but their standard tactic involved raging out before charging their opponents."

"I'm sure that'll make them easier to shoot," Vincent replied. "Let's hope our weapons pack a heavier punch than the Pahxin variety."

"Indeed." Desmond leaned forward. "You should get some downtime before we arrive. I think this is going to be a real pain and you'll probably be busy as hell."

"I asked Zach to get deacon to relieve him as well." Vincent stood. "I'll talk to you when we emerge."

He headed for the elevator, pausing to get a side look at Cassie. She stared at her screen intently, brows furrowed and lips set in a frown. He let out a sigh and left, wondering if they might ever have a chance to talk about what he hoped she noticed as well. Can't get my hopes up. Considering what we're doing out here … I'm not sure we have the time.

***

The Gnosis emerged from hyperspace nearly an hour and a half out from their destination. Desmond gave Salina a chance to get her scan in without asking for it, forcing himself to be patient. Meanwhile, he checked the reports and felt some relief that none of the ship's systems rebooted this time.

Engineering called this out and stated they were cautiously optimistic about a fix they put into place.

"Captain," Salina began, "I've scanned the planet. The weather patterns are erratic, especially over one of the continents with the highest density of ruins. I'd have called it a densely populated area some time ago. After that, we've got strange energy readings all over the place. Our destination seems to have a moderately stable meteorological situation by comparison."

"Anything else?"

"There are still functioning power grids but one near our facility doesn't match." Salina paused. "Sir, I think it might be a downed space craft." She hesitated again. "Yes, I'm certain now. A ship has crashed here and there are small vessels flying coverage around it. They're the only non-organics in the air."

Desmond nodded. "Vincent, prep our fighters and have them ready to go when we get there. That downed ship might need help but if they're hostile, I don't want to make any assumptions. I find it somewhat coincidental they're right next to our destination."

"Probably Vaedra's buddies," Vincent muttered as he contacted the pilots.

Desmond agreed. He reached out to Thayne and Gil and asked them to look at the scan data from Salina. They were down in one of the tech rooms, allowing them to have access so they could help. Once they arrived at the planet and sent people down, their guests would be instrumental in finding what they were after.

Providing it's even down there.

"Pilots will be ready in an hour," Vincent announced. "Since we're still seventy minutes out."

“Good.” Desmond leaned forward, peering at the view screen. With full magnification, they could see the planet but from the quiet of space, it didn’t appear particularly volatile. Mostly brown with specs of blue, the clouds ranged from white to green. Other than the odd colors, it seemed tranquil.

Only the scans told the true story. Desmond looked over the details from Salina and his brows lifted involuntarily. Volatile weather meant hurricanes, feet of rain and devastating lightning storms. Tunnels under the ground providing living space for the various inhabitants. Apparently, things could only venture out for short periods of time before a storm drove them home.

Animals still thrived there though they seemed to have evolved to do so. There wasn’t a lot of data about them but the avians were gigantic, about half the size of a fighter, and carrion eaters. Desmond figured there must be a lot of dead to keep them fed. Anything getting caught out in one of those flash storms likely wouldn’t make it.

Then he noticed the radiation. Several continents suffered from dramatic radiation poisoning spread over miles upon miles. Speculation suggested detonation of weapons or the destruction of above ground power facilities. It stood to reason that these people used whatever formula Doctor Vaedra discovered and perhaps they didn’t bother to work out the volatility problem.

They’d be there soon, and several men would be risking their lives to gather data in the facility. Desmond would’ve preferred to gather what they could from orbit and moved on. Considering their original purpose, he probably would’ve made a case to avoid exploring this world.

Had a Holy Grail of information not potentially resided in their archives, it would’ve been a hard sell to send anyone just then. Even a chance of gathering what they needed had to be enough. The Tol’An weren’t slowing down and if humanity didn’t discover the full extent of their purpose, they couldn’t defend against them.

Or whatever it is they think is coming our way. This is why we’re here. I’ll take those marines out for a drink when we get back to Earth after this one.

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden settled into his seat, watching his scanner as they rapidly approached their destination planet. Their briefing suggested they would be operating primarily in atmosphere, potentially fighting desperate spacers who were stuck on the surface of the planet.

He also noted that they outnumbered their potential enemies by two to one. Nice to have an advantage. Their last mission involved a three-faction battle. The resulting chaos cost them a pilot and a lot of equipment. After that brawl, he figured he was ready for anything the universe could throw at him.

Until he sat through the briefing concerning this planet.

The volatile weather patterns made him nervous. Horrifying storms could come up with little warning and depending on their variety, the best pilots wouldn't be able to handle them. Where they planned to operate proved to be one of the least active locations so they at least had that going for them.

Their potential opponents were flying around down there so that put a mark in the hope column. Plus, the area they were going into happened to be one of the most stable. With any luck, they'd provide some support and return to orbit to await further instructions. The enemy had finite resources to throw at them so he couldn't imagine being in harm's way for long.

Dennis felt relieved he wouldn't be going down to the surface with the marines. The briefing also talked about the indigenous life forms, a bunch of mutated brutes that were super tough and ate people. When the pilots around him exchanged glances, it was clear they were worried about one thing: getting shot down.

Landing on that world without power armor would be pure insanity. I wonder if these things are tough enough to tear into a life pod.

The curiosity was not one he wanted to indulge beyond the rhetorical question.

They drew close enough to receive images from the planet, courtesy of

Lieutenant Gold on the bridge. Dennis was most interested in his opponents and she delivered a fantastic technical readout of the fighters they'd be facing. Short wings and tail fins attached to a compact body with the cockpit visible toward the front of the stubby nose.

Weapons appeared to be energy based with some missiles. The lack of mass throwers intrigued Dennis. The last enemy they faced also forsook actual chunks of metal. He wondered why, if at some point they came to the conclusion they were simply not efficient enough to have any value in combat.

They've been working out great for us so far.

"Mustang, this is Commander Bowman, we are on swift approach to orbit. Prepare to launch in two minutes."

Dennis drew a deep breath, settling his thoughts. Even when they left the Gnosis, the trip to the surface would take some time. Ages ago, when humanity first pierced the stars, it would take the space shuttle an hour to land on Earth. Advanced tech allowed ships to take a far more direct approach.

When they entered the upper atmosphere, the computer would plot a proper course for a safe entry vector. From the moment they committed their plunge to being combat effective would be roughly ten minutes, just a little longer than it took for their predecessors to make it to orbit in the first place.

They would escort the shuttle carrying the marines. The Gnosis was supposed to make contact with the spacers trapped on the planet for some diplomacy, but Dennis wasn't optimistic. Chances were good they already reached out to allies across the stars for help. They couldn't be far behind.

And if they show up while we're here, that's going to be a real fight. I hope everyone's prepared for that possibility.

Bombers were on standby, which told Dennis the Gnosis either planned for company or considered having to hit the downed ship with some high yield explosives. It would devastate the area but removing the control center of the fighters would definitely give them an advantage. Not exactly sportsmanlike, but then again war wasn't

about kindness.
“Mustang, we have achieved orbit. Launch in thirty seconds. Hold position and await further instructions.”
They haven’t made contact yet. I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation.
The countdown began and Dennis led the way, launching first. He banked high to clear the hangar, tossing a beacon to the rest of his team so they could follow suit. The shuttle would come after them and after whatever negotiations concluded, they’d start their run for the facility below.
While he waited, Dennis ran a quick scan of the planet’s weather pattern and found that the winds were manageable and the skies clear over their theater of operations. Good news considering what they might be doing down there in less than thirty minutes. The rest of Mustang squadron gathered around him, falling into a vanguard formation.
Two shuttles lumbered out and positioned themselves behind the fighters. The gang’s all here, Dennis thought, now for the captain to do his part. If we don’t have to fire a shot, that would be okay with me. Something tells me I’m indulging some wishful thinking. No one’s been reasonable out here so far. Why would these guys?

***

Desmond watched various reports fly by on his personal screen, waiting for the one from Thayne and Gil to tell them who they were dealing with on the surface. It hadn’t come yet, and he decided it was time to reach out to them. They’d been working on a variety of tasks and maybe they missed this one.
He established a com link and dialed them in. “Thayne, we sent some scan data to you a while ago. We’re orbiting the planet now and we’d like to head down there but there’s a crashed ship. Does it belong to the Kalrawv? They have fighters so we need to understand what we’re getting into.”
“Sorry, Captain.” Thayne’s voice crackled over the small speaker.

Some kind of atmospheric interference gave it a grainy texture. “Gil just looked and confirmed that the ship you’re seeing belongs to the Kalrawv Group. He believes they thought they could download the data he found without him.”
“Thank you.” Desmond decided not to ask why they hadn’t provided the information sooner. “What’re the chances they will be amiable to some diplomacy?”
“Minimal,” Thayne replied. “As you saw on the station, they were more prone to shoot at us rather than offer a peaceful alternative. Oh, Gil also states that there is some kind of signal being sent from that ship, going out of system. They have likely requested help and if so, depending on how long they’ve been down there, it may be on the way.”
“Understood. I’m signing off now.” Desmond killed the connection and turned to Salina. “Get the ship down there on our com. I want to see if we can prove our guests wrong.”
“We’re transmitting,” Salina replied.
“Unidentified vessel, this is Captain Desmond Bradford of the Gnosis. We are here on a peaceful exploration mission and we’d like to understand your intentions before we break atmosphere. Are you in need of assistance?”
The translator took a moment but he did see they were receiving a message back. Their computer voice spoke for the ship below, articulating the words in a not quite natural way. “Gnosis, we are not in need of assistance. This site has been claimed by the Kalrawv Group. Depart immediately or you will be fired upon.”
Desmond got Thayne back on the line. “Do these guys have a legal right to this planet? Are we violating something by being here?”
“This planet is forbidden,” Thayne replied. “As we mentioned before, the Pahxin have declared it off limits. They are here without concern for their own safety and have defied a legal order from our planet. There will be no legal measures they can hide behind. Besides, we cannot allow them to gather the data Gil found. Weapons in their hands will be catastrophic.”
“Thank you.” Desmond returned his attention to the alien ship. “We

are in need of data on this planet and we're to understand you shouldn't be here. I'd like to make this peaceful, but I won't leave without what I came for. Furthermore, we're not going to let you take anything that can be used as a weapon. My advice is allow us to help you leave this world."
"We don't need your generosity," came the reply. "We will destroy any ship you send to the surface."
"So be it." Desmond killed the connection and turned to Vincent. "Sounds like they've made up their mind, huh?"
"I guess so." Vincent sighed. "They're trapped down there and they still want to fight? This makes no sense. They must've received some kind of message from their saviors … something to give them hope."
"Which means we need to pick up the pace if we want to get what we came for and get the hell out." Desmond scowled at the screen. "Give the ships a go order. Shuttles to the planet, escorts to engage. Cassie, you're in charge of our guests. Make sure they're ready to assist with extracting the data."
"I'm on it," Cassie replied. "I'm tapped into marine coms. Thayne and Gil are standing by."
"Good, don't let them get distracted," Vincent added. "When our guys are in position, they won't have time to wait."
"None of us will." Desmond turned to Salina. "Keep tight on the scans. Their friends might show up before we're done."
"Gil said they don't tend to send multiple ships out on assignments," Cassie said. "So that's something."
Good news for us, Desmond thought. I'd rather not fend off five ships again. He watched as their ships plunged toward the surface, making good speed to break atmosphere. The operation began, and he felt tension grip his gut. The next hour would see many people putting their lives on the line for the data they needed. I hope this pays off.

***

Heat and Gorman talked their way into the mission against the wishes and suggestion of the medical staff. Neither of them intended to allow

a little graze to keep them aboard the ship while the rest of their guys went to the most dangerous place any of them had ever seen. The marines needed all the experience they could get, minor wounds or not.

They weren't up against automated defenses this time. The ships flying around out there were sentient controlled and, on the surface, they needed to worry about two different forces. That part would be the same as their previous mission. They had dealt with aliens and drones there. Depending on how tough the planet's inhabitants were, they might have a hard push to the site.

Heat looked over the others in their power armor and wished he could see some faces. He wanted to gauge the level of tension, but the technology made everyone look calm. They weren't even fidgeting. Chances were good none of them worried too much about the situation. All of them were veterans of the last drop.

The briefing made this one sound somewhat direct and they didn't have to bring back an Orb. Providing part of the planet didn't blow up this time, it couldn't possibly be worse. I probably jinxed the operation. Good job, Heat. These alien worlds and their advanced technology proved particularly volatile and during the briefing, they heard about the unstable power matrix.

Whatever alien scientist thought that stuff up didn't worry too much about safety and maybe it cost them everything. Heat glanced out the window as they broke the cloud coverage and frowned at the barren landscape in every direction. There were trees off in the distance but only rock formations and dust covered the area beneath them.

Can't really judge them considering how badly we've treated our own home. If it weren't for all the resources we put into recycling technology, we'd probably be in a similar spot. I'd like to think we wouldn't go so far as to eradicate our entire species, but I suppose we've tried a few times now.

"One minute to drop," the pilot called. The shuttles didn't want to land. Their goal was to deposit the men and get back to orbit where they'd safely remain near a different squadron of fighters. When the marines called, they'd drop back down and do a hot pickup, getting

them back to the Gnosis in short order.
They'd rehearsed this type of maneuver before when they were training on Earth. It worked out pretty well, but the timing was the trick. After several training runs, they knew when to call in the pilots to get out of their situation with the minimal amount of time in the open. They even practiced it on the moon to get a sense of how to work in different gravity.
"Listen up," Heat spoke over the com, a firm but quiet voice. "When we hit that ground, we have to establish a perimeter then advance on the facility. We can't rush it. Scans show nothing in the immediate vicinity except the downed ship some four kilometers away. They do not have patrols out there right now."
"So what you're saying is we probably won't find anyone to fight," Gorman said.
"Wouldn't it be nice if this turned into a milk run?" Heat asked. "But we all know there are mutants out here somewhere and while we've done some work on our scanners, they still can't penetrate the ground too deeply. Plan for a fight." The pilot turned on the light, indicating they had ten seconds to depart. "Get on your feet. It's go time."

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Chapter 6

Dennis followed the trajectory plotted by his computer and the fighter began to shake. Shields flared from the heat of entering the atmosphere and he kept an eye on their status posted on the digital HUD transposed over the cockpit. They remained at a steady ninety percent through his descent and as the wind caught his wings, he felt the resistance in his flight stick.

He liked the feedback. It reminded him of how he learned to fly as a teenager with his father. Experiencing the wind, working with weather rather than fighting against it. Joining the military helped him hone his skills, turning them into a weapon. As he and his squadron raced downward toward the facility, he prepared himself for the brawl to come.

Scanners showed there were six fighters closing with another five further out. We need to clear the first wave fast so we're not overwhelmed. I could call down the reinforcements and double their numbers … but I don't want us tripping over each other. This will likely be a quick one, especially since we have to keep them off the marines.

Mustang was comprised of six ships, so the odds were even with the first fight. If they took too long, however, they'd be in the thick of a potentially difficult fight. Ultimately, it came down to the skill of the pilots they were facing. Were they professional fighter pilots or people who could keep their craft in the air without crashing into a mountain?

We're about to find out.

The shuttles headed straight for the ground, plotting a direct course that looked like they planned on crashing into their target. They'd level out eventually, just enough to let their occupants jump out, then their plan was to return to orbit. Dennis needed to keep the enemy off of them long enough to get to safety while providing some air cover for the ground forces.

Again, this first wave is key to our success. Take them out and the rest

is covered.
Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring, Mustang Squadron's second in command, broke radio silence. "Listen up, folks. Stick to your wingmen and don't do anything crazy. As far as we're concerned, these are real players out there. Don't assume they're fodder because we don't know the military they belong to."
My thoughts exactly, Dennis thought. He appreciated seeing Shane take some initiative with the men. He wanted a promotion and during a private coaching session, he vowed to show why he deserved it. Since then, he'd been taking on more responsibility. The others liked him and when they followed him, it came naturally. He's doing it right.
Flying Office Corey Parks, the youngest member of the team, added his two cents. "Scans are showing they've got some decent weapons, sir. If I may suggest, we should probably double our shield output. Even a graze from their energy weapons might be enough to cause some real damage."
"You'll sacrifice speed," Lieutenant Hal Brown added. He'd been shot down in their last engagement and Dennis had been worrying about his ability to get back into the saddle since. However, he didn't hesitate to board his ship. The true test would be how he handled combat again. "You might need that maneuverability."
"We'll leave it up to you," Dennis said. "We might even need to make it variable. Just keep alert and do your jobs." He paused, checking the scanner. The way he interpreted the enemy course made him frown. "They seem to be heading straight for our shuttles. Three through six, break and engage their flank. Two and I will join you shortly."
The rest of the wing left the shuttles and rocketed off to attack. Dennis got on the com with the transport pilots, "How close are you guys to deploying your people? We've got serious incoming and they want a piece of you."
"Thirty seconds," came the reply. Warrant Officer Jeb Douglas was the pilot in question. He'd been hauling soldiers since long before the Gnosis and was considered one of the most experienced flyers on the ship. "Can you hold them off?"

“I’ve sent four ships to harass them and if you think you can handle a stray, I’ll head over there too.”
“Go for it,” Jeb replied. “We’ve got turrets and a bunch of guys who aren’t afraid to use them. I’ll see you topside when you’re all done.”
“Sounds good.” Dennis changed course. “On my lead, Mustang Two. Let’s get into position and help our guys out.”
The fight already began some distance away. Beam weapons flashed in the sky, bright flickers that looked like metal catching the sun. Dennis banked, which felt odd considering how much work they’d been doing in space. Much as he enjoyed the wind’s feedback, it wasn’t something he was as accustomed to.
We’ll have to do more atmospheric training. Kicking in the afterburners, the sound erupted around him like an explosion and he was pressed into his seat momentarily before the inertial dampeners fought against the sudden thrust. “We’ll be there in fifteen seconds,” he announced to the rest of the wing. “Approaching from your southwest.”
“Affirmative,” Hal replied. “Watch your four o’clock, Five!”
Mustang Five, Flying Officer Alicia Quinn, performed a barrel roll and dove, heading straight for a rock formation. She pulled up and engaged the afterburners, rocketing away from a pursuing enemy who couldn’t seem to keep up. It looked like a close call to Dennis, but he didn’t want to distract the woman at that moment.
We’ll be talking about that one in a debriefing.
The few seconds it took to close the distance, Dennis watched the enemy fighters pull off some ridiculous maneuvers. One pulled a suddenly climb and flipped, racing off away from what should’ve been an easy kill by Mustang Four. Another went into a triple barrel roll, dropping down to below a thousand feet above the ground before hitting afterburners and dashing away.
Dennis focused on an enemy that was trying desperately to get a firing solution on Hal. It writhed about in the air, acting as if none of the tight moves bothered the pilot at all. Maybe their inertial dampeners are just that good. His computer began to beep as it attempted to acquire the target but there wasn’t enough time to get solid tone.

He needed to warn the guy off, buy Hal some room. Pulling the trigger, he went for guns, launching a volley of metal. The shots came within feet of hitting his target but even with the miss, it made the ship break off its relentless motion. Oddly, it never fired at Hal but seemed to be waiting for the perfect shot.

They want one shot kills … or they have a limitation. Maybe all that fancy flying cuts into their ability to shoot their beam weapons.

Dennis wanted to scan them for more info, but a proximity light burst on to his right. He dove, increasing the throttle as one of the enemies blasted away at where he'd just been. It would've been a direct hit and he only got away because they got too close. Do their weapons have an effective range?

The question helped him calm his nerves and he looked all about, checking for additional dangers. As he engaged in the action a second time, he saw Shane hammer a target with energy weapons, a direct hit to the rear. The curve of shields became obvious in the attack and seemed to shatter like glass.

A follow up with guns tore through the engines and they went dark. The fighter plunged toward the surface, but the pilot ejected. His pod launched a good twenty feet from the downed vessel before a chute deployed. A quick calculation put his landing at nearly five miles from his base of operations.

If the briefing about the locals was to be believed, then ejecting was only a temporary salvation. Dennis considered the plight because he'd been thinking about it for his own people. If anyone survived a direct hit and went down, they'd be in for a world of hurt. Marines would have to risk their lives to save them.

Mustang Five launched a missile and the enemy banked hard, allowing it to fly off until it seemed to grab a new target. As it curved, it became obvious it was going for Mustang Three. Once it zeroed in on the ally ship, the friend or foe indicator kicked in and it flew aimlessly for a good five seconds before dropping from the sky.

The AI decided to let it go rather than risk a mishap.

"Careful with missiles," Dennis called. "These guys are way too maneuverable to make them effective. Stick to beams and guns." He

banked to the left, avoiding an attack then immediately had to go back to the right. The quick motions jostled him about and even with the dampeners, he felt it in his bones.
Firing his rockets, he got a glimpse of an enemy ahead of him and took a shot with energy blasts. They struck the top of his target but didn't go through the shields. I need to be able to sustain those! His opponent seemed to go crazy, flipping and diving as if the pilot literally just swung the stick around randomly.
If we tried that nonsense, we'd be dead. How are they able to survive these moves?
"Got one," Alicia announced. "All that flying couldn't help him when he got too low."
Glancing at his scanner, Dennis noticed that Alicia had gone down near the mountains and lured in an opponent. She somehow got him to crash into the rocks and was on her way back to join them. He scowled, returning to Shane's side before calling out to the team. "Do not abandon your wingmen. We need the backup."
"It's kind of hard," Shane replied. "Considering how these guys fly."
"I know, flexibility is important." Dennis's eyes widened as two ships came around up ahead. They want to play chicken? Fire or dodge? He didn't have time to decide, pulling the trigger before banking away from Shane. His attack might've hit, he had no idea but the wake of the ships as they rushed past him caused the frame of his craft to rattle.
Dennis spun toward the two enemies, wincing at the pressure it put his body through. He found himself staring at their tails and as Shane came around beside him, he figured they had a good chance to splash two more. Considering the way the targets flew, he didn't have time to worry about closing too much.
"Light them up," Dennis said. "Don't hold back."
Pulling the trigger, he felt his ship vibrate for a brief second before the beams burst out. The first ship pulled away and avoided the attack but the second one went the wrong way. Shane anticipated his motion, catching the top of his target. The shields must've been weaker there because he cut right through.

A crack appeared and the enemy burst in half. Engines went one way while the cockpit went another. They spun a good half mile before the power core exploded.

Dennis checked and noted they were down to three enemies. The other five would be on them in the next two minutes. They needed to pick up the pace if they wanted to keep the odds even. Even as he considered it, Lieutenant Kate Zeller, Mustang Four, called out a Mayday. Damn it!

"I've been hit," Kate said. "Engine one is down. I've still got two."

"Get out of there," Dennis called. "Can you make orbit?"

"Maybe … I'll definitely try."

"Go! Quick! Get out of here!" Dennis wondered if he needed to send an escort with her, but he couldn't afford to lose numbers. As her ship burst out of the melee and flew off, he was grateful to see the few remaining enemies didn't decide to pursue her. There weren't enough of them anyway. They might think it's a ruse to get their backs to us.

Corey took a direct hit and a hexagonal pattern appeared briefly before the shields faded back to near invisibility. Dennis spared the younger pilot a good look, noting with relief he'd made it seemingly unscathed.

Corey dove and his pursuer gave chase. Alicia called out she was moving to engage but as she did, Corey banked hard to the left, a tight maneuver that must've crushed him into his seat. The enemy flew past, shaken free. Dennis went into evasive action and lost sight of the conflict for a moment.

When he leveled out, he saw Corey scream in behind his target, discharging a volley of beams and mass driver shots. A direct hit caused the enemy's engines to smoke and they broke toward the ground. A moment later, it impacted with the surface, a dust plume bursting some thirty feet in the air.

"I told you guys," Corey said. "Double shields."

"Consider us sold," Dennis replied. "Hm. Check out the scans. Looks like our last two bogies are heading back toward their allies."

"Should we pursue?" Shane asked. "They're going to stack the odds against us if we don't."

Dennis took a moment to consider the situation. He didn't like the idea of shooting someone who was fleeing the scene. It didn't seem like the honorable thing to do. Airmen from Earth's distant past relied on that unspoken trust between one another, a sense of fair play. However, this situation felt considerably different than those days. So far from home, fighting a group which had never heard of their rules of engagement, Dennis realized they needed to fight differently. He may not have liked it, but it didn't matter. They needed to keep their allies on the ground alive and that meant maintaining air superiority at all costs.

"Pursue and engage," Dennis called to the others. "When you have a shot, take it. If we knock those two down, we keep even odds." His shields showed down to seventy percent, a surprising figure. I must've taken a grazing shot or two. Maybe during some of those crazier maneuvers when it wouldn't have been as easy to notice the hit. Automated repair might get them back to full strength but either way it wouldn't slow him down. Dumping more power into the defenses nudged them up to eighty. A direct hit might cause a real problem but providing he was remotely cautious, he wouldn't have to find out what lurked on the planet's surface.

The Pahxin marked the planet forbidden. Dennis had no desire to see why first hand.

***

Heat plunged toward the ground with the others all around him. Each one was roughly thirty yards away, giving them a decent spread. It helped to spread out, making it harder to do significant damage to several of them at once. Small bursts from their jump packs gave them distance after they left the shuttle.

His HUD indicated all systems were online and ready to go. When they were on Earth, one of the tech guys told him they'd developed a prototype for personal shields and were testing it out. They didn't expect it to be available for a while but with a second Orb at their disposal, they might be able to step up a delivery date.

Considering what they experienced when fighting the Pahxin before, he looked forward to the extra little bit of defense. Their armor provided enough boosted strength to handle the additional weight. The real clinch in the plan involved heat dispersal and ensuring they wouldn't get cooked inside their armor.

Heat's altimeter showed he was only two hundred feet to landing. The facility they were after, another one built into a mountain, stretched out not even a mile to the north. A courtyard seemed surprisingly clear of debris but the old buildings that used to occupy the space were mostly flattened.

He engaged his rockets to slow his descent, putting down just behind a section of rocks. Other flares from his squad ignited around him as they came to rest at various points around the target area. Letting his weapon lead the way, he stepped out and checked the perimeter, his scans showing no enemy contacts.

I don't trust that, Heat thought. There's no way someone's not around here. Could they possibly be blocking our signals?

As if reading his thoughts, Gorman expressed the same concern.

"Contact the ship," Heat said. "Find out what's possible."

Gorman kept him on the line as he established a link. "Agent Alexander, this is the ground force. We're running a scan but aren't picking up any contacts down here. Can you confirm? Are we experiencing a malfunction?"

A moment later, Cassie's voice replied, "I'm not picking up anything either. This might be from the atmospheric interference. I'm having Gil check. Please stand by."

"Begging your pardon," Heat said, "but we really don't have much time. We need to move. The briefing suggested there were a lot of these weird mutants running around down here."

"Understood," Cassie hummed. "I'm picking up the enemy fighters so I'd cautiously advance if I were you. I doubt they have anything capable of blocking scans … but we have seen stranger things."

Damn right, Heat thought. "Alright, men. Let's move out. Keep it tight and frosty. God knows what we might find down here. Don't rely on scans alone, use your eyes. Providing these pricks aren't invisible, we

should be able to rely on vision."

Heat led the way, stepping out from behind his cover and using his jump pack to hop up a small hill. As he landed, he was able to walk forward over some even terrain. Gorman took his right with Sergeant Alex Gillet on the left. They cast their gaze in all directions, watching for enemy contact.

They were nearly halfway there when things began to feel entirely too easy. Are these things hiding out inside the base? The thought made Heat curse inwardly. Power armor was best when used at range. Close quarters worked but they couldn't engage their rockets nor use the heavier ordnance.

"Anyone else have not feeling good about this?" Gorman asked.

"What's not to like?" Gillet asked. "We're walking right up there. No one's shooting at us. Do you have to be a killjoy?"

Private First Class Kelly chuckled but he sounded nervous. "I'm pretty sure you just jinxed us, Sarge."

"Nah," Gillet said. "When the attack comes, that's where it's supposed to happen. I don't plan for the violence. I just assume it's going to happen."

As if on cue, a blue beam cut through the air directly in front of Heat, pulverizing a rock to his right. He glanced in the direction of the attack, noting his scans didn't pick up anything. Sure enough, there were people up there aiming weapons down on his squad. "Contact west!" He shouted. "Engage!"

Weapons discharged from various directions as the marines moved for cover. Whatever weapons their enemies used made a buzz sound as it approached, turning the air to steam. When a blast hit the ground, it looked like a landmine went off. An unnecessary scan indicated one shot would be enough to penetrate the power armor.

Thank you, computer. Heat crouched below a rock, wondering whether or not it would be sufficient to stop one of those attacks from getting through to him. Gorman fired a rocket that flew overhead and Heat risked a quick glance to see the results. The shot connected with the cliff near the ambushers, causing the wall to crack and crumble. It drove their opponents back, giving the marines a moment to

regroup.
“We need to hit them hard,” Private Dorian called out. “Permission to jump up there with Kelly.”
Heat shook his head. “No, that’s not the objective. I want them gone too but we need to use this time to get into the facility. The faster we get the data, the quicker we go home. If we get into some protracted gunfight, everyone suffers. Air support, shuttles, Gnosis … no, we gotta move. So go! Double time to the objective!”
They burst from their respective covers and used their jump jets to cover great distances. Heat entered the open courtyard and worry gnawed at him. Only the doorway leading into the facility seemed to be standing. A flight of stone stairs led up to it, making the place feel more like a grand temple than a tech center.
Maybe this was more of a religious type library for the people living here before. Heat was nearly there when he took a moment to look around. If his assumption was correct, the indigenous lifeforms might’ve still considered it to be sacred. Any additional attacks might be more brutal than the small ambush they faced.
“Contact north,” Gorman called. “Not the freaks this time … looks like some of our friends from the station, Heat.”
Heat focused on the stairs and saw five men leaning out with firearms. They were dressed much as their pursuers on the station but with strange masks as well. No additional protection. One of them took a shot and grazed Heat’s armor, barely scratching the surface. It would take a direct hit to even annoy one of the marines.
“Open fire.” Heat took aim and shot his attacker, knocking him back a good two feet before he dropped to the ground. The others took cover in the hallway, hiding on either side of the open doorway. Just as the marines opened up, they heard shouts from all around them, the cries of innumerable voices. “Ah, shit.”
Dozens of the local populace came dashing at them from behind, screaming incoherently as they approached. The marines were nearly to the facility but even as they approached, weapon-fire pounded the ground around them. Only twenty feet to go! Heat thought. “Move, guys! Move!”

They jumped through the doorway, taking cover as they landed. Private Dorian made it last, sailing through the air seemingly in slow motion. A blast caught him in the back and he tumbled, sliding on the ground a good distance before sliding to a halt. He didn't move but no one had time to check on him.

The aliens hiding in the facility turned on the marines and opened fire.

Are you kidding me?! Heat blasted two of them himself and Gorman finished the last one off. They pressed against the door and watched as their bigger problem continued swarming toward them. Now that he had a moment, Heat saw they were indeed massive brutes, probably standing a good eight feet tall.

Their broad, muscles shoulders wore bone armor and they carried massive energy cannons as easily as one of the marines might a sidearm.

"We can't handle all those," Gorman said. "What's the play?"

Heat got on the com and connected with Mustang One. "We are in desperate need of some air support at the facility coordinates." He nodded to Gorman to open fire. The other marines started lighting up their charging opponents. "Like pretty much now … and if you can't get here then send someone else. We're facing an army!"

"Understood," Dennis replied. "Getting someone there now. Hang tight. We're about thirty seconds out."

Great. "Thirty seconds!" Heat shouted. "Gorman, get your ass down this tunnel and grab our data. The rest of you kill as many of those massive bastards as you can. None of them gets in here! Don't hold back. If you have the ordnance, let it fly. Go!"

Gorman clearly didn't like his part in the plan but he hurried down the tunnel. Heat noted the man paused briefly to check Dorian before hurrying off. There were no illusions in battle. The boy probably didn't make it. Those blasts were powerful. They needed to provide the lowest profile targets possible and keep alive until the air support could thin the herd.

He popped two of the aliens in the head and their bodies dropped, causing others to trip and stumble. At least they die easily enough.

Though I suspect they could take a shot to the chest. We might have a chance … but with those numbers? The pilots better get their asses here fast or this is going to be a real short assignment.

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Chapter 7

Mustang squadron engaged the second wave of fighters when the call came in from the marines. Of the two fleeing ships, one was downed and the other managed to escape, heading back toward their crashed ship. The new five threw themselves into battle but they were evenly matched, with neither side pulling ahead.

“Charger,” Dennis called over the radio. “This is Mustang One, we are divided up down here and need some backup. Do you copy?”

“We are on standby in orbit,” Charger One, Squadron Leader Anna Jager replied. “We can be to your position in one minute.”

“Too long,” Dennis said. “How fast can you get to the marines?”

“About the same.”

Dennis hummed. He hadn’t liked the idea of leaving an entire squadron in orbit when they needed all hands down below but there was some concern about an incoming capital ship. If that happened, the Gnosis would need the screen. Regardless, that hypothetical fight should’ve been trumped by the very real conflict going on in the clouds.

“We need to break from this fight,” Dennis said. He paused to consider his options, dodging an attack and diving under a fighter that nearly collided with him. The action was intense and each of his pilots were having to work every skill they possessed to keep ahead of it. Alicia suddenly came to mind.

The younger pilot had already proven foolhardy enough to get herself out of situations she shouldn’t have been able to. If she could get back to the marines, she could provide the cover they needed. Providing the enemy pilots let her escape. He didn’t like the order he was about to give but he didn’t have a lot of choice.

“Mustang Five, can you get back to the facility?”

Alicia chuckled over the line. “Not without some dangerous flying.”

Dennis knew she’d been a solid pilot and had excellent scores from school, but he didn’t know her background prior to joining the military. Had she learned to fly in a circus? It would explain her devil-

may-care attitude and definitely the way she got around out there. Considering what she pulled off, he wouldn't have been surprised by some kind of stunt gig in her past.
"Okay, you're authorized to do whatever it takes. They need air support pretty much now. Get back there, ASAP. Got it?"
"I'm on it, sir."
Dennis once again narrowly avoided an in-air collision and had to pull a barrel roll while diving to squeeze between two of the enemies at the same time. He fired his mass drivers, ripping into a target before he had to bank away. His scanner showed Alicia flipping and juking about as one of the enemies tried to pursue her.
It became quite clear her opponent couldn't keep up. She'd gotten away and in the next few moments, she'd be able to help those soldiers who needed it. We're pulling this off … slowly but surely. Now, if we can disengage when we're ready to leave. That will be the trick. One I'm sure will take something akin to a miracle to pull off.

***

Heat leaned out to take a shot and a blast skimmed his shoulder, tearing off a chunk of his armor. The force made him stumble but he managed to do so into cover. He checked his scanner, hoping to see an incoming fighter. A little hope would go a long way just at the moment. Even in the thick of the fight, his mind had a chance to wonder what might happen.
A blip appeared on the farthest edge of his computer's range. Heat's heart pounded harder, but he didn't dare to tell the others just yet. If for some reason he misinterpreted what he saw, if the incoming vessel turned out to be an enemy, he didn't want to give them a false sense of security.
Just at the moment, they needed to fight for their lives. The enemy hordes were closing and would be at the stairs within a minute. Even with their sustained attacks, the marines barely dented the incoming forces. If those fiends made it to them, there'd be no stopping them, no real fighting back.

Fighting in the doorway would nullify the enemy's numbers slightly but not enough to matter. They charged without fear of injury or death, coming on them with all the recklessness of mindless drones. Heat missed fighting the automated defenses of their previous assignment. At least those made sense.

***

Gorman hated the fact he left the others behind while charging into the facility alone. He connected his com to the Gnosis, patching directly in to Doctor Vaedra's station. Thayne would be there and hopefully, they'd be able to help him get through the computer system quickly. Any delay meant a horrible end.

He got to a T intersection and paused. "Don't know if you can see my uplink, Doc, but I need some directions."

"Go to the left." Gil's voice was translated instantly. "You will come upon a door that has been destroyed."

Gorman picked up the pace, rushing down the dark hallway until he came upon a shattered bit of metal. Some kind of sliding door had been there before, but someone had blown it up. He used his night vision, looking over the area. He appeared to be alone with only a single console standing like a pedestal in the middle of the room.

He advanced closer. "I think I've found what we're after. What do I do?"

"Place your computer near it," Thayne said. "We'll be able to remotely access it from here."

"How do we have a compatible interface?" Gorman asked. He complied with their request. "I mean, how's our wireless the same?"

"Our cultures," Thayne explained, "yours, theirs and mine, have all used the same architecture. The Orb technology may have been interpreted differently but ultimately it is close enough to the same that it doesn't matter. We make small adjustments and we're able to access their network. And besides, Gil's already done it once."

"I modified your devices before you left," Gil added. "So it won't take much to crack their security again. In fact, I'm already working

through it now."
Sure enough, the screen lit up and displayed dozens of characters across the blackened screen. Gorman directed his attention to the rest of the room, peering around. Beside the door he came in, another door sat opposite the terminal. It was still intact and closed but he had a bad feeling about it.
His scans weren't piercing the walls here which was one more annoyance about the planet. The enemy had found a way to avoid being picked up on scans as well. How did they pull it off and more importantly, should he be worried about something hiding down there? He looked back at the screen and sighed.
They didn't have a meter showing progress.
"How long will this take?" Gorman asked. "We're in a time crunch."
"Gil didn't grab much before," Thayne replied. "I guarantee the captain is going to want as much as we can get. Considering this will tell us what we're hoping to find out, it won't be wasted time. Please be patient."
"We have a lot of monsters outside the door, guys." Gorman gritted his teeth before continuing. "We really don't have the luxury of patience."
"We'll hurry," Gil offered. "I'm transferring the data to your unit for expedience. Be sure you survive, Sergeant Gorman. You'll have all the information until you get back aboard the ship."
Lovely responsibility, thanks so much!
Something clattered behind the closed door, like a pipe dropping on cement. He aimed his weapon in that direction, but he kept the computer close to the terminal to ensure the connection wasn't disrupted. He practically held his breath as an obvious commotion continued until it seemed to be just on the other side.
"I might have company," Gorman muttered. "Did they come down here when you were here, Gil?"
"No, we had driven them off prior to my entering the facility," Gil replied. "However, it is something of a temple to them so chances are good they returned quickly. And they likely know the tunnels and halls better than we ever would. I would be very cautious. We have

another full minute to finish the download."
"And how exactly am I going to be cautious stuck beside the damn computer?"
"Um … shoot them when the door opens?" Gil sounded sorry about the advice. "There can't be too many down there. Right?"
Or there's hundreds and I'm about to be eaten by these things.
Twenty seconds passed and he knew he had less than a minute to go before he could leave. The doors opened. He fired his weapon the moment they cleared the area, catching one of the monsters square in the chest. It stumbled backward, a look of shock contorting its features. When it recovered, rage replaced the surprise and it charged. Gorman loaded it up, firing half a dozen rounds. The first three didn't seem to phase it but the last one caught the monster right in the face. It dropped only five feet away from him, greenish blood splattering on the floor. "Jesus Christ! That was intense!"
"Are you alright?" Thayne asked. "We heard gunfire."
"I took your advice, but we really need to hurry. How long?"
"Twenty seconds. Then I deploy the cleanser."
"The what?" Gorman asked. "What's that?"
"Something to ensure our Kalrawv friends don't get the formula," Thayne replied. "After all, we know they want to use it as a weapon. Better to get rid of that data, hm?"
"You wiping the whole thing?"
"We don't have time for that. Just as much as we can."
More footsteps came from down the hall. The monsters must've found another way in, a method to attack from the rear. He had to warn the others. If he didn't get out, they were about to be flanked. The computer said he had another ten seconds. Firing a rocket through the door, he hoped it might cause a cave in.
The explosion made the floor shake and there were screams but no appreciable damage to the structure. Oh well, it was worth a try. His computer chimed, letting him know the download was complete. Several sets of angry eyes appeared in the darkness as he darted for the door he'd come through earlier.
"Heat!" Gorman shouted into the com. "They have a back way in and

they're all over my ass! Tell me we have an exit!"
"Working on it," Heat replied. "Just stay ahead of them and we'll see what happens."
Great advice! I'm so glad we're on top of things. Gorman burst down the hallway, moving as quickly as the power armor would allow him without jump jets. The monsters pursued, and he knew they'd likely have to fight them before they left the base. He hoped the others were prepared for the action.
He sure as hell didn't want to do it alone."

***

Alicia engaged her afterburners, flying just over a hundred feet above the ground. The facility was less than ten seconds ahead and she could already see the swarming forces on the ground. They didn't come up on scans, but a rough estimate put their numbers at over fifty. That didn't include all the bodies from those the marines managed to kill. Dropping two rockets, she fired her beam weapons a moment later, cutting into the heart of their swarm. Bodies flew dozens of feet into the air, limbs and pieces missing from the explosives. The beam weapons sliced through the ranks, incinerating entire lines of the brutes. Her first pass probably took out at least twenty if not more. Spinning around, she fired again, this time blasting at the ones nearest the stairs. Only after she fired did she realize the marines were probably taking refuge in there. Holding her breath, she felt a profound sense of relief wash over her when she missed the entrance, which would've likely sealed them in.
I'm going to hear about that one later. One more pass broke the monsters and they began fleeing toward the hills. Success … maybe that will keep people from complaining too much about my tactics.
Alicia's ship shook as something caught her on the side. Glancing in that direction, she saw one of the enemy pilots coming at her, throwing random energy blasts. Swerving to the left, she invited him to chase her and he obliged, going after her at nearly full speed. That's it, you'll like where I'm going.

He took several more shots, but she knew he was back there now and she easily evaded each assault. “Mustang One, this is Mustang Five. Mission was a success, but I’ve got company on my six. Can you assist, over?”
“We’re on it,” Dennis said. “Maintain present speed and course.”
Alicia kept up her evasive maneuvers, feeling confident until she noticed something on the horizon, closing fast. A black and red set of clouds seemed to be blowing toward them, a volatile weather front.
“Hey, do you guys see that?”
Mustang Two appeared in front of her, firing two rockets and diving. The enemy behind her went up in a ball of flames but Alicia didn’t even notice. She was fixated on the storm. Her scans indicated that the winds in it would easily take them down and that was without the lightning raging within.
“Get back to orbit,” Dennis said. “Now. Shuttles, you’d better hurry your asses up if you want to get off this rock. You’ve got maybe ten minutes to get out of here before you’re stranded.”
“We’re on it,” Jeb replied. “Thanks for clearing the ground. Our boys will appreciate it.”
Alicia climbed, jamming the throttle forward for the extra speed to achieve orbit. The others surrounded her, falling into a tight formation. They’d easily get out before the storm took them, but she had her doubts about the marines. Considering what they were facing down there and how nasty this weather was, she wondered if they would have to wait it out.
I sure as hell hope not. Those monsters looked pretty pissed. Come to think of it, they might not have broken because of me. The storm may have scared them off. That’s a terrifying thought considering how scary they were. Good luck, guys. We’ll see you back on the Gnosis soon … I hope.

***

Three of the attackers made their way into the facility and had to be engaged in close quarters. They were tough, tossing Corporal Vine all

the way down the hall into the darkness. Heat blasted one in the face, shot another in the leg and kicked one in the gut hard enough to burst organs.

The wild melee lasted until the explosions erupted outside. Everyone paused for half a second to look, noting it came from one of the pilots finally providing some air support. After their first pass, the second got a little scary as they nearly took out the entrance. Those few mutants still in the hallway redoubled their violent efforts.

One lifted Heat off the ground and slammed him into the wall. He struggled to get his weapon aimed when he suddenly dropped to the floor, his opponent dead on the ground. Gorman and Vine rushed toward him and one of them must've shot the thing. The other marines gathered around the door.

"Sir," Corporal Anderson said. "They're running. They broke!"

"I doubt it's that easy," Heat muttered, looking outside. "Gorman, how many were chasing you?"

"A lot but they should've been on us by now." Gorman looked back. "I don't understand."

"Look!" Kelly gestured to the horizon and Heat grunted at the sight of the storm. The clouds looked more like smoke from a toxic fire and as they rushed toward them, red lightning danced about in them.

If hell had a weather pattern, we just found it. Heat got on the com to the shuttles. "We need an immediate evac. Can you beat the storm?"

"Affirmative," Jeb replied. "Providing you boys get on the ships immediately."

"Grab Dorian," Heat said. "We have to be ready."

"I've got the data," Gorman added.

"Good, you got it. What—"

"No," Gorman interrupted. "Like … it's on me. We didn't have time to upload it to the ship."

Heat sighed. "Gorman's on the shuttle first. Everyone follow his lead."

The sound of the approaching ship caught his attention and he looked out. While the pilots had a better view of what they were dealing with, Heat didn't feel like it was possible for them to get to the ground and return to orbit before flying through the maelstrom.

“Ten seconds.” Jeb’s calm voice finally annoyed Heat. He’d always thought the man was dead inside, but this took it to new and impressive levels. Considering their situation, the danger they were all about to face, it would’ve been nice to have a little tension. He’d asked the pilot why he never became escalated about anything.
Jeb replied, Life’s too short to worry about how it’ll end. Not exactly poetry but it did mean he was the most relaxed individual on the ship. That didn’t translate to a lack of urgency. His ship was hauling ass down to them, flying probably way too fast. As he engaged the retro rockets, the storm was nearly upon them.
The back ramp opened and Gorman boarded immediately. Next, Kelly and Vine carried Dorians body. They loaded up the two shuttles and before the doors closed, they were climbing again. Heat looked outside and saw the clouds following them. He had to adjust to look through the window.
His scanners indicated a heightened level of static electricity, but they were only on the edge of it. The fringe winds were enough to cause massive turbulence, making the ship rattle violently. They needed to get above it, well away before they were caught up in the middle. The computer stated they’d be facing cyclones in there capable of tearing the shuttle apart.
Jeb knows this, Heat thought. He won’t slow down until we’re in orbit. The sky began to darken but whether it happened because the storm consumed them or they were reaching the upper atmosphere, Heat couldn’t tell. The ship continued shaking. The lights went out. He drew a deep breath, preparing himself for whatever might happen next.
If this is it … well … maybe we can all jump and make landfall without dying. But God knows what that storm’s dumping on the ground. The mutants didn’t want any of it. I doubt we’d fare much better.
Something hit them hard just moments before the rattling stopped completely. The jarring difference between extreme turbulence and stillness made Heat question whether or not he’d died. Looking outside, he noted they had achieved orbit. His men cheered, hooting

all around him but he merely took a moment of silence.
“Lightning strike tried to bring us back,” Jeb said. “But we were already up here. Engines will need some serious work, but I told you we’d make it.”
Heat wanted to comment but he kept quiet. The fact they’d survived was worth more to him than bantering with the crazy pilot. He’d saved their lives and for that, Heat’s guys would probably buy him a lot of drinks. Unfortunately, they’d lost a man … Dorian was gone. Considering the odds, they did pretty well but it didn’t make it easier. How are those people marooned down there going to survive? How have they survived so long? It makes no sense. Their ship’s automated defenses must be sufficient to keep those monsters back. Or maybe they only bother invaders when they go into their sacred temples. Either way, I don’t envy them … even if they were too stubborn to accept our help.

***

The Gnosis broke orbit and headed away from the planet. They needed a place safe for departure, somewhere they’d be able to initiate hyperspace the moment they knew where they were going. Cassie sat in the tech center with Thayne and Gil when Gorman arrived, still in his power armor. He gave them his computer and left for his debriefing.
“Excellent!” Thayne attached it to the computer with a physical connection for a swifter download. “Shouldn’t take too long now to get what we need and be on our way.”
Gil nodded. “We’ll need some time to decrypt it, too. Luckily, I’ve already broken the code. The process might take an hour or so.”
Cassie said, “It’ll take a while to get to a safe hyperspace position. Plenty of time to find what we’re after … right?”
“Should be,” Thayne said. “But while that happens, I’m going to have something to consume. Do you both care to join me?”
“I’m fine,” Cassie replied. “I’ll report what we’re up to while you both indulge. They’ll want to know before we leave, I’m sure.” She watched

them go before establishing a connection to Vincent. “Hi …”
“Oh! Hey …” Vincent was in his quarters. “Um … how’s it going?”
“The information is downloading from the marines,” Cassie said. “We’re anticipating it to be available for query soon. Once it is, we’ll dive in.”
“Good, great. I’m hoping you’ll be able to give us some coordinates before we’re ready to go.”
“That’s the plan.” Cassie cleared her throat. “That um … that’s all. I just wanted to give you a quick update.”
“Thank you. That’s great. Perfect.” Vincent smirked. “Maybe when we’re on our way to the next place, you can slow down for an hour to have dinner.”
Cassie’s first instinct was to say no but she held it back. “I guess we’ll see how intense this research is, huh?”
Vincent nodded emphatically. “Absolutely. It could be crazy. You might be really busy. I get it. But … you know … we all have to eat. And take breaks. I have to remind Zach all the time. He’d sleep in his chair on the bridge if he could, I swear.”
Cassie chuckled. “I know. I’ll be sure to contact you when I have a few minutes.”
“Thanks, Cassie … Good luck.”
Cassie killed the connection and slumped in her chair. She had to admit, Vincent was an attractive guy and she’d dated far worse in her time. Unfortunately, neither of them could really afford the distraction. Especially not while out there in the middle of nowhere. While the Pahxin had charted the area, humanity had not.
Being the first humans to set eyes on these places meant they needed to be particularly wary. If anything went wrong, no one was coming to save them. This danger unto itself ensured they needed to remain vigilant. Though if Cassie was to be honest, her constant engagement didn’t mean a whole lot to their survival.
And having dinner with an officer wouldn’t exactly cut into any specific duty. Maybe it would be nice and if it happens organically, then all is well. I won’t force it, one way or another.

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Chapter 8

Desmond sat in the briefing room before the others arrived, reading through the reports from both the pilots involved in the action and the marines. The mutants proved to be as big of a problem as they feared. It made sense why the Pahxin quarantined the planet. The Kalrawv Group risked a great deal for their potential weapon.

They clearly hired daring people, those willing to wait in some of the worst conditions Desmond had even imagined rather than work with potentially friendly strangers. He wondered about their loyalties and where they stemmed from. If it was just another corporation, a business essentially, then what did they pay them for such devotion? Or was it more about leverage? Did the Kalrawv Group blackmail their employees into total obedience? These were questions he would ask Gil later when they weren't involved in a critical assignment. The enemy pilots proved to be tough and willing to take crazy risks … though not quite as insane as their own pilot.

Alicia Quinn would likely be speaking to her squadron leader about the actions listed in the report. Considering her actions very likely saved the marines, Desmond doubted there would be a formal reprimand. However, he did expect she would hear about taking unnecessary risks during combat.

One of the marines died during the fighting, a private named Remus Kelly. He'd taken a shot while they were moving for cover, some kind of beam weapon capable of tearing through the power armor. Scan data from the combat would be analyzed by the engineers to see about better protecting themselves against such attacks in the future but it didn't help the young man.

That's three marines lost to these trips so far. Desmond sighed. We need those personal shields. It might've saved some lives.

Gil, Thayne and Cassie were able to extract the data from the download and would arrive at any moment to provide a briefing on what they had discovered. Vincent planned to join them along with Salina. Zach had the bridge. They'd traveled four hours away from the

facility and were in a good position to hyperspace out of the area. We just need a destination.

The others filed into the room, taking seats around the table. Cassie tapped her computer and took control of the large screen occupying the wall. A solar system appeared and it took a moment for Desmond to recognize it as the one they were currently in. He noted the scans indicated only one habitable planet.

The rest were barren but each held a notation beneath the image. At one time, they were all habitable in some way, but some event had devastated them. Abandoned structures on different planets were little more than ghost towns, standing in the wastes of poisoned atmosphere and wild temperatures.

“So this place looks like it’s seen better days,” Desmond commented. “Where are we going to start?”

“History of this system,” Cassie said. “I’m speaking for the team. We found logs from scientists who lived on that planet, the leading men and women who helped build some of the most advanced technology anyone’s ever seen … even the Pahxin. They relied heavily on automation and artificial intelligence to run the foundation of their society.

“They were connected up to all the planets in the solar system, which they’d occupied in various fashions. Some required domes while others they were able to modify the environment to be livable. A centralized station, which crashed in the northern hemisphere of the world we visited, maintained all technology for every planet.”

“That seems crazy,” Desmond said. “I’m assuming there were backups and such.”

“Yes, on each world,” Cassie replied. “Unfortunately, they weren’t segregated from the main system. So while they could take over if the signal was lost for a few days, they would sync back up quickly which leads us to what happened here. Every planet in this solar system died within a few weeks.”

“How?” Vincent asked. “Nothing could work so quickly … cause so much devastation. I mean, even if someone weaponized the formula Gil found, it wouldn’t cause all this. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

Cassie shook her head. “You’re not but this wasn’t a straightforward attack.” She tapped her computer and the solar system flattened and several dotted lines appeared, starting from outside the system and touching a block near the primary world. From there, solid lines branched out to the different planets.

Desmond frowned. “Someone attacked the station.”

Cassie shrugged. “Maybe. The logs state they detected a signal which originated somewhere beyond their solar system. It went straight to the station and from there, branched out to all the worlds it interacted with. Within hours, strange things began to happen, but they didn’t have time to isolate the problem before the violence broke out.”

Vincent’s brows raised. “Violence? Why? What happened?”

Cassie brought up another screen showing twenty different columns, each with a different color. “While the people of these worlds lived in relative peace, they were still divided into several factions. These were groups living in different sections of the worlds with the smaller controlled by two or less of these pseudo nations.

“Shortly after the signal hit the station, the groups began fighting. We have reports that they blamed each other for attacks which left infrastructure devastated and civilians dead. Retaliation followed and before anyone could talk about the events leading to the war, they’d already sent themselves spiraling toward destruction.”

“Bad enough to warrant all this?” Desmond gestured at the screen. “To corrupt the people into those monsters?”

“They relied on power plants built from the formula Gil found,” Cassie explained. “While they had it regulated fairly well, they weren’t built to withstand explosions and direct assaults. The radiation leaks alone were enough to cause widespread death and contamination. Those who survived the initial problems were further altered by the water.”

“Wow …” Vincent shook his head. “So the entire solar system entered into a massive war because a signal hit the station and … what? Made the AI go crazy?”

“Yes,” Cassie said. “And in a subtle enough way to not be obvious. Whatever that signal said to the station made it perform actions in the right way to make the catastrophe look like sabotage … like attacks,

not malfunctions. It didn't help that there was some suspicion between the factions too. Not on the verge of hurting each other but they were definitely competitive."
"So we know what happened here," Desmond said. "What about this signal? What else did the scientists know about it?"
"They were able to plot a trajectory." Cassie brought the slide back up with the line leaving the system. "Their data shows where it came from and we did our own theorizing about it. Unfortunately for them, while they definitely figured out where they were attacked from, they had no way of figuring out why or who did it."
"But you know where?" Desmond clarified.
"Yes, we have the coordinates and we can plot a course at any time." Cassie brought up another slide, a different system with ten planets surrounding a star. "This is where we'll be going. Unfortunately, even Thayne and Gil were unable to discern much about it. It may still be inhabited because the interference we're receiving appears to be generated from technology."
Thayne stepped in, "There's a continuous signal blocking our deep scans. We're able to find a safe place to hyperspace in but beyond that, we cannot tell if there are ships there or the population. However, we all believe this is where we will find the answers to why the Tol'An are trying to collect the Orbs."
"Furthermore," Cassie added, "we've checked the surrounding solar systems, several Gil claimed are pretty much like the place we just visited. They're all in a similar state. Trashed and either uninhabited or blasted back to something like a modern stone age. Technology went crazy on those worlds and whatever made it do so is there." She gestured to the screen.
Desmond narrowed his eyes at the screen, contemplating the situation. They'd left Earth to figure this out, to find the answer about the Tol'An's plans. The risk of traveling to the new system weighed on him. They had no idea what to expect. There could be an entire fleet or it may be just as dead as the others.
If there are sentient beings alive there, why would they wipe out their neighbors knowingly? Something isn't passing the sniff test here. Pure

malevolence doesn't ring true to me.
Vincent asked, "What're the chances the Gnosis will be impacted by whatever hit the technology here?"
"The signal ceased to broadcast a long time ago," Cassie said. "It would have to hit us directly but now that we know about it, we can protect ourselves against it. The power of this attack, if that's what it was, is the surprise nature of it. No one knew the AI would go crazy so they weren't prepared for the repercussions."
"I don't think we have a choice," Desmond said. "We need to get out there and see what's going on. If we have any hope of understanding our enemy, we need to know what's got him spooked. Maybe this information will help us in our negotiations with Thayne's people. They're unhappy with the Tol'An too … Any evidence against them should be good."
"Definitely," Thayne said. "Unless our military is far more clever than I suspect, and I do not believe they are, then they will not have this information. The motivations of our enemies have always been suspect, however. The cult mentality of the Tol'An makes them dangerous and unpredictable. We may have just proven otherwise."
"Indeed." Desmond turned to Salina. "What's your opinion?"
"I believe we're on the right path," Salina said. "And I'd like to work with Zach to plot our course immediately."
"Go ahead." Desmond turned to Vincent. "Get me an ETA for departure as soon as you can. Let engineering know we'll be out of here soon and give the fighter pilot's a heads up. We might need them again. Cassie, you guys did great work. Thank you. I appreciate it. We're on the final push now, folks. Don't lose focus when we're close to the end."
Desmond watched the team depart and remained behind, contemplating the information they had shared. An entire civilization wiped out in such a short period of time. The concept felt eerie. Technology became a sentient being's method to overcome physical inadequacies, to give people time to innovate and think.
Such advances were tools but when they became crutches, then terrible things could happen. Humanity proved to be fortuitously

thoughtful about how they allowed technology into their lives. So far, most things were not required to survive. However, they hadn't reached a point where computers controlled every basic aspect of life. At such point, they'd be just as susceptible to destruction as these worlds. A strange signal might come along and destroy them as well if they weren't prepared. If the Tol'An knew half of what they'd just discovered, he understood why they were looking for a way to avoid it. Considering the annihilation he had just learned about, their violent methods even made sense.

I wonder if they warned anyone before taking it upon themselves to protect the galaxy. Perhaps if they'd worked with their culture, they might've had some buy in. Something tells me they want to be saviors though, those who protect the people from a horror. It would give them power, put them in a position to usurp authority.

Desmond doubted any chance of altruism from the Tol'An. They'd proven themselves monstrous with how their captured individual died from some triggered response during interrogation. They kidnapped Thayne, attacked Earth and stole their own culture's Orb. Ultimately, whatever they managed to do would not put them in a positive light. They were pirates with a religious code to excuse their actions. Maybe their leadership even believed in the propaganda, but Desmond thought of it as a publicity stunt. The Tol'An shouted out what they stood for to mask their base desire to control the lives of others. Sadly for them, humanity had spent the better part of four hundred years defying such groups.

We sure aren't going to stop now.

***

Alicia reported to Squadron Leader Arden's office, prepared for a reprimand. He sat behind the desk, reading her file on the computer while she stood at attention, waiting for his commentary. Part of her didn't care what he had to say. She knew she'd done the right things during the mission and saved many lives.

Anything he had to criticize would be protocol related and those

wouldn't keep her from flying.
"You had quite the day," Dennis said. "Would you say some of your stunts weren't exactly by the book, Officer?"
"No sir, they were not," Alicia replied. Her brown hair was cut fairly short, but her bangs tickled her forehead. She desperately wanted to brush them aside but she hadn't been given permission to leave attention.
"Care to explain?"
"Permission to speak freely?" Alicia asked.
"Granted."
"I did what I had to do not only to survive but to assist my squadron in their mission. The risks I took were well within my skills to remain safe." She paused, wondering if the rest of her statement was wise. She decided it didn't matter. "You must've realized I had it or you wouldn't have sent me to provide cover for the marines."
"There were two things I didn't like about your flying out there," Dennis said. "One involved your disregard for sticking to your wingman. I went over your flight recorder and you rarely linked back up. That put you both at risk. The second thing was those maneuvers. You're lucky to be alive after pulling those off and I'm shocked you're not sore."
"It was jarring, sir," Alicia replied. "But I could handle it. Furthermore, the fighting down there was less conducive to our standard operating procedures. We had to adapt to the enemy and that involved some erratic patterns. Kate got hit because she wasn't evasive enough. Those guys didn't care what happened to their bodies as long as they won."
Dennis seemed to fume on her comment for a moment before continuing on. "I looked over your file and I don't see anything in your past that shows how you were able to pull those maneuvers off. What did you do before you joined the military?"
"My father was a pilot," Alicia said. "When he retired from service, he started an air show. I learned from him … some stunt work, a little trick flying. It paid off today in a major way. You really learn how to handle the G force and it makes fighting seem pretty simple by

comparison. The precision isn't as necessary."
"I see." Dennis sighed. "Okay, so here's the deal. We have rules for safety and efficiency in this business. If we're going to change it up, it needs to be agreed upon or at least communicated. Are we clear?"
"Yes, sir."
"Do you have any questions?"
Alicia made a play at considering a few before shaking her head once. "No, sir. I'm good."
"Thank you for your time." Dennis gestured for the door. "Dismissed."
Alicia saluted and spun on her heel, departing the office. That went better than I expected. When they landed, no one seemed to be put off by her flying. It really must've caught Dennis by surprise. She wouldn't say it out loud, but the mission gave her quite the thrill. It might've been in bad taste to suggest it, but she enjoyed the risk.
Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan's voice piped through the overhead speakers. Alicia paused to listen to what he had to say.
"Attention all hands, we will be entering hyperspace in ten minutes. Please secure yourself for departure. Repeat, we are leaving in ten minutes."
Alicia hurried back to her quarters and strapped in, turning to the computer. Public reports throughout the ship appeared on her screen, showing readiness of each department. A message went through to the squadron leaders letting them know they would be tasked with another sortie when they emerged at their destination.
Good. Alicia grinned at the prospect, but her spirits were dampened by a realization. They might end up like Charger Squadron, sitting up in orbit waiting for a fight that never came. Mustang led the way thus far in all engagements but considering Kate's ship might not be repaired in time, they may be the backup.
I guess we'll see. Either way, the adventure's been worth it so far.

***

Desmond joined Salina at her station to peer over her shoulder. She pointed out a blip on the scanner and brought up a detailed reading. A

ship achieved orbit around the planet they pulled the data from, the silhouette consistent with the one that crashed on the surface. So their support arrived.

"How long before we're out of here, Zach?" Desmond asked.

"Two minutes, sir."

"Perfect." Desmond stepped back. "Have they scanned us, Salina?"

"Yes, sir. They know we're out here."

"Not for long." Desmond took his seat and strapped in. "By the time they think about coming out here to see what we have, we'll be long gone."

"Unless they find the data as well," Salina pointed out. "Then they'll know where we went. Of course, we didn't cause the disaster that befell their ship, so they have little reason to bother with us … right?"

Desmond wasn't so sure. The Kalrawv Group proved to be a bunch of mercenaries and they weren't above attacking fellow spacers. If they thought the Gnosis carried something of value, they'd definitely come after them. He doubted they could track them through hyperspace, but he couldn't be certain.

"I guess we'll find out when we get to where we're going." Desmond turned to Zach. "All systems are reporting green. Engage the hyperdrive."

The ship vibrated momentarily before blasting out of the system. They were on their way to what Desmond hoped would be their last destination on this mission. If it proved to be a dead sector they simply had to explore, all the better. However, their luck hadn't proven so good so far. He didn't anticipate it getting any better.

The trip would last six hours, just enough time to allow some of his people to get some rest. There were a few repairs to handle and some preparations to be made but for the most part, the crew of the Gnosis had a chance to take a deep breath. They all needed it. Especially considering none of them knew how intense the next few hours would be.

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Chapter 9

Cassie woke with a start, turning to look at the clock beside her bed. The alarm hadn't gone off yet, but it would in less than twenty minutes. She wanted to be up, clean and dressed before they emerged from hyperspace and she had just over an hour to prepare. A dream roused her from deep sleep, a reminder of the vision she had from the Orb.

The planet they left had been through a cataclysmic event like the one she'd witnessed. Had they all? Were they the same? Technology went so insane in her vision that nature itself answered with fury of its own. The terror those people experienced made Cassie tremble, even days removed from experiencing it.

Cassie hurried through a quick routine and threw on her clothes before rushing out the door. She wanted to be on the bridge when they arrived, to see the scan data first hand. Gil and Thayne would be down in the tech lab, but the bridge stations received priority services. The thrill of discovery was tempered only by the threat of some unknown adversary waiting for them.

What could possibly be out there? The question made Cassie shake her head and as she waited for the elevator, her imagination went wild. An armada of enemy vessels, automated defenses capable of wiping out the ship in a single shot, radiation so potent the shields couldn't save them … pretty much the scariest stuff I can think of might be possible.

The elevator opened and she stepped on, drawing a deep breath before tapping the button. It only took a moment before she disembarked but her heart sped up just before she arrived. The others were already present. Desmond at the center with Vincent to his right. Zachary relieved Deacon and Salina was prepping her station for arrival.

Cassie sat down without a word and logged in, waiting for her various apps to initiate. Just as she checked in, Zach called out they were emerging in less than a minute. Lord, I barely got here in time. Thank

God the dream woke me up. Cassie turned in her seat to watch the view screen. The countdown from ten began and the screen opened just as the ship vibrated back into reality.

They arrived at the edge of the system, a dim star sitting at the center. Brilliant colors danced away from the center, creating a dazzling rainbow effect. Nothing else occupied the screen, no other sights to catch with the naked eye. Cassie spun back to her station and started scanning the area. While Salina would be doing the same, their objectives would differ.

The star itself barely put forth enough energy to brighten the horizon. It had burned down to such an extent, none of the planets could possibly support life, at least not without a lot of technology countering the effects. Cassie noticed it merely faded to the state it was in rather than burst in any sort of dramatic faction.

She wondered if it had been the victim of a natural event or something else. Her mind wandered to what type of technology might be required to kill a star in such a way. They didn't have the power to do so with Earth equipment yet, but she could see such a thing as a distinct possibility.

Cassie redirected her efforts to find energy readings, anything to do with technology that might've come from an Orb. Salina's first objective involved finding potential targets, or enemies of any type. Once they established the area to be clear, they'd start in on the planetary scans. This would let them know the state of the different locations.

Many questions could be answered before they moved from their point of entry. Were they on the verge of encountering an existing civilization? Were there life forms in the area? What kind of natural dangers did they face out there? Had they come to the right place? While her scans ran, Cassie checked their coordinates and confirmed they had found the signal's point of origin.

Now we have to pinpoint exactly where it is. And be thankful we didn't stumble upon a bunch of bad guys ready to blow us out of the sky.

"Contact with alien technology," Salina said. "I'm picking up several

space stations throughout the area. They appear to be offline … wait … not all of them. There are energy readings from one near the fourth planet in the solar system. I'm marking it on the screen."
Cassie directed her efforts to that area, frowning at what she saw. Sure enough, one of the stations was showing online and the power readings were consistent with the output they expected from Orb tech. Life support systems appeared to be active but it would've taken an adjustment for humans to breathe the air.
The people who built that developed in a different environment but not dramatically so. If I can remotely access their systems, I can make the change which would allow us to function there without breathing gear. Cassie tried to establish a connection but cursed when they proved to be too far away still.
"Are we going to advance?" Cassie asked. "I can make that place safe for a landing party if we get close enough."
"We're still mapping the area," Desmond said. "Patience. We'll get around to moving soon enough. I promise."
"Explosives," Salina said. "High yield devices are littering space out here. They seem to be … yes, they're mines. Mostly surrounding the fourth planet and that station. I'm calculating their destructive power."
Oh good, now we get to find out how dead we'd be if we triggered one of those.
Salina didn't take long, reporting back, "Each of those is about as powerful as two of our bombs. If we advance, we're going to need to take care of those from a distance. Proximity will matter too. If we got too close, they'd cause a lot of damage. Oh, and if that wasn't enough, they appear to be magnetic."
"Why not?" Vincent muttered. "How tough are they? Can't we just take pot shots from a safe distance and wipe them out?"
"There are well over two hundred of them," Salina replied. "They're also in a net so going over them to get to the station isn't really an option. Individual shots will take a while, but I can say it would be quite doable."
Desmond added, "If those Kalrawv freaks tried to follow us, we might

not have that much time. Furthermore, we don't know what will happen if we suddenly attack those things. We might wake something else up. Cassie, are you reading anything that would indicate there are automated defenses we should worry about?"

"The station appears to have some defensive systems," Cassie said. "But they shouldn't be hard to shut down. If we can get close enough for me to fix the life support, I'll try to handle the rest."

Desmond nodded. "I think we need to advance … but cautiously. I'm surprised we haven't picked anything else up out here though. What about the planets?"

Salina announced, "Six in total. They appear to be completely lifeless but like the last system, every one of these planets has some type of mechanization. There are buildings, cities, and other sentient built items but they are not occupied by anything alive."

"That doesn't mean much," Victor said. "Those weird mutants were able to ignore our scans."

"Fair point," Desmond said. "What do you make of that, Salina?"

"If the population have a method to avoid our scans …" Salina shrugged. "Then I suppose there may be lifeforms down there. But they would've had to figure out how to get past breathing. If they exist, and I'm not sure they do, then they'd have to be using breathing gear when they go on the surface."

Cassie added, "I'm not seeing anything down there that might be creating artificial environmental safety. The station at least has a power reading, so I'd be willing to say we'd detect such a thing on the surfaces of these planets."

"Okay …" Desmond turned to Vincent. "What do you think? We could put some fighters out there to help clear this mess up. They're going to be more precise than we are."

Vincent nodded. "The mines have to be far enough apart to not blow their neighbors up when they detonate. That means we should have a good idea of how far away we should stay while firing at them. Agreed?"

"Good assumption." Desmond rubbed his chin. "I'd say we shoot at one ourselves and calculation the radius of explosion. Also, we'll be

potentially springing whatever trap is out there … if there is one."
Cassie watched the two men, waiting for them to finish their discussion. Vincent checked his computer and nodded once. "Pilots are ready to launch so we can get them out there just in case. We might want them to be at the ready."
"Tell them to go. And have the marines prepare themselves as well. Looks like they'll be heading into that station when we get closer. Hopefully, it turns out to be deserted and we can just gather some data. Wouldn't that be nice for a change?"
"I'm all for it," Vincent replied.
"Cassie, when you get close enough to fix that place up, do it," Desmond said. "Our people will be wearing their armor but I'd rather them not be in hazardous space if something goes wrong with their gear. Salina, keep an eye on scans and if anything tries to jump out, let us know right away. I want to be prepared. Zach, get us moving but keep it slow. I'm not interested in barreling into a bunch of mines."
"But it sounds like so much fun," Zach muttered, engaging the engines. "Hundreds of explosives, all magnetic, coming right for us … You'll never feel more wanted, Captain."
"Not exactly the kind of draw I'm looking for, but thanks for the note," Desmond replied. "Okay, everyone. We've got assignments. Time to work through them. The sooner we complete these tasks, the sooner we can go home and report in. Believe me, Earth wants this data as quickly as possible."

***

Vincent met with Captain Darren Gabriel, the commanding officer of the marines on board. They'd known each other for a number of years, prior to being assigned to the Gnosis and their rapport had always been positive. Though they served two different branches, their paths crossed on joint operations many times.
As they sat down in a room together, Vincent brought up the space station. They didn't exactly have a layout for it yet, but they knew

where to dock. Gil believed he could work through the security protocols to get in without blowing the hatch and Cassie would make the place safe should something happen to their gear.
Using one of the stations that was closer by, and totally shutdown, they were able to come up with some decent data. They knew they'd been used for a large number of personnel, quite possibly two to three hundred total. While they might not all live there at the same time, they could be accommodated in a pinch.
This meant they had a large section of station to get through. Prior to arrival, Cassie and Salina committed to figuring out exactly where they needed to go to prevent a lot of wandering and unnecessary exploration. While the power was working, no one knew for how long or why this particular was still online at all.
It represented the best option for finding what they needed. The planets were barren. Not even the cores were giving off power readings. Without anything to go on, they could search for months without locating anything more than ruins and archaeological relics. There may even be something useful amongst the ashes of those civilizations, but the Gnosis had a specific goal.
Gabriel shook his head. "I really need more data, Vincent. We're sending our guys into something we can't even guess at. This isn't like the inhabited space station. At least we knew there was air and livable conditions. What sort of opposition are we walking into? How long has it been? Will the place start falling apart as soon as we set foot on a deck?"
"We don't know yet," Vincent replied. "The mine field has to be mostly cleared before we can gather more data on that one specifically. We've sent a probe to one of the dead ones to see what we can glean from that. If they're similar, we'll have more to go on. For now, we have to go in as if we have no intel."
"We won't be pretending," Gabriel said. "This is a nightmare. The mines alone should be worrying you flyboys. How're we going to clear them? I saw the scans. Those are high yield. The damage output of the different explosives would be catastrophic to smaller vessels and two or three of them could pop a hole in the Gnosis easily."

“The space between them is no accident,” Vincent explained. “We’re about to test the theory but it stands to reason that the people who built those things knew what they were doing. Maybe we’ll get lucky and the whole field will go up when we start lobbing shots in there, but I doubt it. I think we’re going to have to take them out one or two at a time.”

Gabriel scrutinized his screen and shook his head. “They’re pretty tough. Common mass drivers won’t trigger them. Beam weapons maybe but even then … I’m guessing we’ll have to dump some bombs on them to be honest. And you know those aren’t as plentiful as our other ammunition.”

“You think the bombers?” Vincent saw the same data but hadn’t considered how much damage the mines might take. They were high explosives and he figured they’d detonate on contact. Another thought occurred to him. “We know they’re magnetic. Maybe they just need to connect with something metal to detonate?”

“You thinking about probes?” Gabriel nodded. “Not a bad thought. Especially if you throw one out there that’s fast enough to grab a group. They could all link up and pop together. Might make a neat hole through their defenses and get us to the target quicker. But … we’d be burning through those things. I know they’re expendable but do we have that many?”

Vincent considered the inventory and shrugged. “I guess it’s relative to what we need. I’m not entirely sure. It’s definitely worth a try … but we’re getting off topic here. We need to talk about what happens when they get on the station.”

“They’ll follow the path given to us by your tech people.” Gabriel shrugged. “We don’t know enough to go beyond that simple of a plan. When we get closer, let’s get back together. Right now, I’ll prepare the troops the best I can. I’ll probably just say we don’t know anything and good luck for now.”

“I’m sure that’ll go over well.”

Gabriel sighed. “You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had to go with that for a briefing.”

“Probably not.” Vincent stood. “Alright, I’ll catch you as soon as we

get something else. I'm reporting back to the captain and I'll pass on your concerns about those mines. Hopefully, we can bust through those quickly. Lord knows we don't want to mess around any longer than we have to."

"Talk to you soon, Vincent and good luck."

Vincent returned to the bridge and sat beside Desmond. They discussed the brief meeting and quickly focused on the mine situation. The Gnosis was nearly close enough for their first shot, which would help them determine how powerful the explosives would be. Vincent privately hoped several of them were duds, deteriorating over time. Something tells me that's wishful thinking.

"Zach," Desmond said. "Stand by to fire beam weapons at the nearest mine. Keep us at extreme range."

"Aye, sir." Zach tapped his controls. "I'm ready."

"Fire."

Vincent watched the screen through narrow eyes as two blasts burst from their cannons. It took almost three seconds before impact. He held his breath, wondering if they'd have to hear the results from Salina as a report. When the massive explosion whited out the screen, he looked away quickly, covering his face.

"Whoa!" Zach called. "That was not what I expected."

Salina said, "Those are far more powerful than I first related, sir, but they are somehow concentrated. In other words, they will do catastrophic damage at close range but the further away you are, the less harm they will cause. In fact, our shields would hold at the outer edge of their explosions."

"Interesting." Desmond rubbed his chin. "That to me says they intended them to cling to a target and tear them apart."

"I agree," Vincent said. "What's scarier about that is that they're close enough to where we'd end up with five or six of them on us at a time. So many of them would easily destroy the entire ship … probably obliterate it."

"We can avoid that then." Desmond stood up and paced closer to the screen. "How many can you shoot at a time, Zach?"

"Five maybe … They're spread out pretty well."

“What about the probe idea?” Vincent said. “We could send a couple in to see if they’re big enough to attract some.”
“Sure.” Desmond nodded. “Cassie, launch a couple of probes. Zach, start clearing them out. Get the marines to the shuttles and we’ll deploy as soon as we can. Keep a close eye on the scans. The more of these we trash, the better chance I think we have of waking something up … Whether that’s an automated defense or something worse, I don’t know.”
Vincent joined Cassie as she prepared to launch the probes. “Do you think it’ll work?” He asked.
Cassie shrugged. “It’s definitely worth a try. They’re pretty small though and I think these mines are meant to stop Gnosis sized ships. I’m almost willing to bet the fighters are too small for them to care but we’ll see in a moment. Depending on our luck though, this might take hours. Imagine when this culture was still alive.”
“Yeah, you wouldn’t be given the option to sit around taking shots at their mines.” Vincent hummed. “I wonder why this in particular is so well defended.”
“Hopefully, because it’s the jackpot we need.” Cassie grinned at him. “We’ve been pretty lucky so far, you know?”
“Feels like a strained form of luck to be sure.” Vincent turned back to the screen, squinting in anticipation of another mine explosion. “Launch away.”
***

Anna Jager launched first of all the fighters. Her unit was tasked with checking out the mine web to see if they might be able to pot shot a few while the ship took out theirs. Luckily, extreme range was enough to remain safe from the explosion so during their briefing, the pilots were told not to get too close.
When Anna saw the first explosion from her cockpit prior to departure, she understood what they meant. The rest of Charger Squadron joined her and they flew in a vanguard formation until they were parallel with the Gnosis on the starboard side. They were spread out and signaled when ready.

“Okay, sync on my computer,” Anna said. “I’ll distribute lines of targets so we don’t shoot at the same ones. Providing our weapons are tough enough to detonate them, we should be good.” She tapped the screen until she assigned each ship several mines. “And … there we go. Fire at will.”

Before they even started shooting, the Gnosis took out another four. The resulting flashes made Anna jump. She hadn’t anticipated them going up in such a spectacular fashion, even after seeing it on the computer screen. Witnessing the destructive force of those things in person made a huge difference.

Her people began to shoot, laying into the mines. The first few volleys didn’t seem to be enough to damage them but then Charger Six, Simon Gell, proved they could do it. Two of his targets popped in the same chaotic fashion as the others, giving the fighters hope. They continued their slow, but mostly effective work.

The Gnosis launched a set of probes into the mine field. Someone thinks those mines will be attracted to the metal, Anna thought. I bet it’s too small. Sure enough, the probe made it all the way to the station and halted there. Maybe they’ll get some good data from it now at least. At this rate, we’ll be at this for more than an hour.

Flight Lieutenant Frank Maze, Charger Two, spoke over the com. “It seems like there must be an easier way to clear this field. Why don’t we just have someone fly through there really fast and try to get the mines to connect with each other? I’m sure we could get a whole row if we were particularly fast.”

“Insane,” Anna replied, “but creative. No one’s flying into that mine field. We have no idea how fast they are. Half a mistake and you’d be dead. And besides, we’re all alone out here. Why not do it risk free? Sure, it’s taking a while but no one’s going to die because we’re shooting these mines.”

Half an hour of blasting away, Anna began to feel the impatience Frank expressed. They had taken down dozens of their targets but there were still far too many to risk flying through. At the rate they were going, even with the Gnosis, they might be at it for the better part of a shift. Mustang was on the opposite side of the ship doing

their part too.
These aliens really didn't want anyone bothering their station … or the nearby planet. How the hell did they get through without dying themselves?
"Charger One, this is the Gnosis," Lieutenant Salina Gold contacted her. "Do you copy?"
"I'm here," Anna replied. "Go ahead, over."
"I've picked up a hyperspace signature on the edge of the system … essentially where we came in. Be advised we believe these might be hostile forces. We are repurposing your squadron for intercept."
Better than sitting here, I guess. "Understood," Anna replied. "What's the ETA for their arrival?"
"Less than thirty minutes …" Salina paused. "Far faster than they should. We'll be moving to meet the larger ship but we're well aware they have fighters. Screen us as we move. Over and out."
Anna directed her squadron to form up and they redirected to face the enemy. It looked a lot like the ship that went down at the last planet they visited, and she already picked up a number of fighter blips on her radar. The odds involved the twelve Earth ships versus twenty enemy vessels.
According to Dennis, these guys were pretty good. Time to find out if he was using hyperbole.

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Desmond turned to Vincent. "So those probes made it all the way to the station, huh? Are we able to connect to them? Can we access their network now?"
Vincent nodded. "Cassie's on it."
"Can she grab the data we need? Or will it be necessary to send the marines?"
"I'm afraid we'll need some people over there," Vincent said. "Some of the systems are hardened and require physical interaction at the terminals. It's pretty obvious the fundamental systems were managed remotely but they protected their data."

“Okay. And we’ve plowed a decent hole through the mines so far.”
Desmond considered his next words carefully. His plan had some potentially dangerous repercussions. “The shuttle might be able to make it through. And their turrets should be able to blast a few that might be too close. I think we need to try it if we want the data. What do you think?”
“I’m not happy about it but I agree.” Vincent rubbed his eyes before continuing. “We have the perfect pilot for the run too. I’ll get them moving right away as we turn to face this new threat down.”
“Okay, we’ll be underway shortly.” Desmond stood. “Zach, turn the ship about and sound battle stations. I’d hoped we could do all this the easy way but apparently, nothing out here comes without a struggle. Cassie, figure out how far away you can be from those probes before you won’t be effective. That’s our anchor and we won’t maneuver beyond it.”
“Thanks,” Cassie replied. “I’m accessing their network now. The tech Gil and Thayne provided has made it a lot easier. I’ll definitely be able to impact the life support system then I’ll work on the defenses. By the time the marines arrive, the place should have some breathable air.”
“See if you can’t help them with the mines too,” Vincent called as he waited for the elevator. “That’ll make the op a whole lot easier.”
“The enemy is deploying fighters,” Salina said. “Surprisingly, they’ll be on us in under five minutes.”
Zach sounded the alarm as the shields raised. Weapons charged for the battle ahead. Desmond returned to his seat and prepared himself for the conflict ahead. They were only facing down one ship this time, rather than the horde the Tol’An had during their previous mission. Still, he had a worse feeling about this one.
They were too quick to dive into battle, too fast to throw away their offer for assistance when their comrades were down. How the Kalrawv Group tracked them to this system didn’t matter much at the moment, but it would be a point of investigation later. Just then, Desmond intended to win the fight and accomplish their primary mission. Anything else would be a bonus.

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Chapter 10

Gorman boarded the shuttle but for the first time in his career, he genuinely didn't feel good about it. The station didn't bother him. Cassie had proved herself enough times to be trusted with her part of the bargain. His concern was getting there in one piece. Flying through the mine field sounded flat out insane, even if the Gnosis blasted several of them.

In typical Jeb fashion, the pilot looked bored when he took his position. Gorman began to worry about the man's senses. He might need some therapy or at least a conversation with a pretty doctor. The preflight check only took a few minutes and they were ready to go. Five marines took their seats and the ramp closed.

Heat led the mission again. He'd found a piece of armor to replace his damaged shoulder. The force of the blow left a nasty bruise, but he still had full range of motion. The others were Anderson, Vine and Kelly. Everyone volunteered to go and Gorman suggested they draw straws. No one could agree on what the shortest straw would mean so Heat just picked the team.

The shuttle launched, and Jeb addressed them all. "So this might be a crazy trip or it might be boring. I've got Opie on the turret. He'll address any of these mines we're too close to. Tech boys gave me a good scan distance, so we'll know long before we're in danger. Of course, if they screwed up … Well, we won't know about it for long."

Very inspirational, Gorman thought. Thanks, Jeb.

"Just get underway," Heat said. "We don't need the particulars. Nothing we can do about your flying anyway."

"Well, about that. I did have an idea," Jeb replied. "They launched a probe and these mines didn't bother with them. Chances are good you can use your jump packs to get to the station if you have to. So if it looks like we can't make it, I'm recommending you bail out and make a go for the station on your own."

"Then what?" Gorman asked. "Ain't exactly going to be fast getting back to the Gnosis and the whole reason we're sitting in this trap is to

make it quick."
"Yeah, but at least you only have to come back to me," Jeb said. "Maybe you can shut down the mines in there too. Who knows? Anyway, I'm just sayin'. We needed a backup plan and that's mine."
Gorman shook his head. "Well, it sucks."
Heat shrugged. "He's got a point." The shuttle picked up speed. "We might even be able to transmit whatever we're after."
"Speaking of which." Gorman got on the com with Cassie. Once it was established, he launched right into his question. "If you've got a couple probes over there allowing you to play with life support and defenses, why the hell can't you grab the data we're after? Why do we need boots on the deck?"
"Two reasons," Cassie replied. "One, we need a visual of inside the station to get a better feel of the people who lived there. Second, the security varies. They remotely managed most systems but of course, the data warehouse is locked down and requires physical interaction. That's where you come in. But don't worry, I'll be able to walk you through it."
"Lovely." Gorman sighed. "Thanks, Cassie."
"Feel better now?" Heat chuckled.
"Yeah, loads." Gorman looked out the window and they were already passing into the minefield. "Oh God …"
"Don't look," Heat advised. "No good will come of watching one of those hurl towards us and blow up. Believe me. I saw the first one go on my view screen in the barracks. Thing went up like a reactor core. Without the filters, it would easily blind a man. And just imagine, they were taking out dozens of them to let us get this far."
"And we've got those Kalrawv freaks in system again. They're pretty tenacious."
"I'm guessing they'll think twice when the Gnosis bloodies them again." Heat checked his scanner. "They'll be in battle range when we're at the midway point. Based on how big of push overs their troops were in that tunnel, I'm giving the whole skirmish twenty minutes. Half hour tops."
"You wagering?" Anderson asked.

Heat shook his head. “No, but I’ll take your estimate and give you kudos if you beat me.”
“I’m thinking an hour,” Anderson replied. “I heard their pilots were scrappy.”
“Got it.” Heat turned to Gorman. “Cheer up, man. We’re almost there.”
The turrets went off overhead and lights flashed in their windows. Gorman resisted an urge to look, using his computer to see how they did instead. Two more mines were taken down by turret fire. Sure enough, they would’ve flown too close to them. I guess the Gnosis didn’t get this far in … nor the pilots. But they do have a range.
“End of the line, folks,” Jeb called out. “I got you as close as I could.”
“What?” Gorman looked outside then checked his scanner. They were two kilometers away from the station still, but a massive net of mines stood in their way. Far too many to start shooting if they wanted to arrive with any time soon. “Lord, that’s a long ways, Jeb!”
“Better get going then.” Jeb opened the ramp. “We’ll eliminate the mines from here and make ourselves a hole. I doubt you’re going to walk in and find what you’re after anyway, so I’ve got plenty of time to get to you. Just focus and you’ve got this.”
“This isn’t the most insane thing we’ve done this year,” Heat said. “I’d argue visiting that weird space station takes the cake.”
“Getting shot at by aliens is nothing compared to using jump packs to navigate a mine field,” Gorman said. “But I guess I get you. Come on. I did the most bitching, I’ll lead the way.” He moved into position, peering out at the nothingness of space all around him. A flash of red off to his left represented one of the mines though it was easily a good three thousand yards away.
Beam weapons lit up the sky as the battle silently raged around the Gnosis. Two capital ships engaged and the pilots did their dance. The scene might’ve been beautiful if he didn’t know precisely what it represented. If the Gnosis did not win that fight, the marines would very likely be marooned on the station.
At least until the Kalrawv Group figured out how to get to the station. Then … who knows what would happen?

“Dude, get out!” Heat called. “You’re blocking up the door.”
Gorman stepped out, using the ship to pull himself up and gain some momentum toward the target. The station looked huge but it was so far away still; he knew they’d be floating for a while. Even with jump jets, he anticipated more than five minutes in open space with only high explosives as their nearby companions.
And when we’re out of range, Jeb will start shooting these. I hope to hell he waits until we’re at the station at least.
Weightlessness hit him as he hurled himself away from the shuttle, using his scanner to find the best path. He needed to move his body to engage the jump jets properly as they weren’t exactly designed for open space. This meant bending at the waist to move down and turning to his sides to move left and right.
Luckily, he wasn’t going too fast or he wouldn’t be able to alter his course. His computer said the other marines were right behind him. They spread out quite a bit, a natural inclination from their normal missions but in this case, it made sense about the mines. If one of them were taken out, providing the others stayed far enough away, they wouldn’t die too.
I have so many cheery thoughts when I’m on an op.
“Whoa!” Anderson shouted. “That was close … Nearly connected with one of those things.”
“If it didn’t go after you,” Heat said, “then Jeb was right and we’re okay. Thanks for testing the theory.”
“Yeah, my pleasure,” Anderson grumbled.
Gorman tucked and turned to avoid one of the mines, then leveled out. Getting back on course took some more writhing about but he finally aimed himself properly. He lost track of time but his body ached from the strange motions and tension of being out there at all.
A warning sounded on his computer and he frowned at the message. One of the mines moved. Not a lot but it nudged toward him as he passed it. “Um … guys? That mine just looked at me.”
“Um … what?” Heat asked.
“Yeah, it moved … a little.” He paused. The mine moved again, slowly but obviously. “It’s coming after me.”

“I’ve got it,” Kelly said. “Don’t worry about it.” Gorman glanced back as the private rocketed toward the mine.
“Dude, it’s active!” Gorman couldn’t believe he had to speak up. “What’re you going to do?”
“Shut it down somehow,” Kelly replied. “Relax. Seriously.”
“If that blows up, we’re both dead, man! Get back from it!”
“Take a deep breath, Sarge.” Kelly connected with the mine and started tampering with it. Gorman held his breath while the man worked. Something sparked and the mine’s light went out. It began to drift and Kelly rocketed away. “Told ya. Piece of cake, man. Though honestly, even if it got its claws on you, I doubt it would’ve been able to blow you up.”
“And what makes you think that?” Gorman asked.
“Just a theory, but it seemed that it needed to cover more of its surface in metal before it would go up. There ain’t enough on us to make these things blow.” Kelly chuckled. “I hope I’m right or that was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”
“Yeah, probably was,” Heat said. “But thanks for taking care of it. That would’ve blown up for sure if it followed us all the way to the station.”
Gorman forced himself to breathe easy, relaxing when he noticed how close he was to the station. As he drew closer, he put his feet toward the station and fired his rockets to slow down.
The computer helped him find the right speed that wouldn’t cause damage to himself or the structure. It beeped until he fired the rockets hard, reducing his momentum until he gently touched down on the surface. His magnetic boots kicked on, allowing him to stand normally. It was disorienting to be stationary; he took a moment to acclimate.
Vine slammed into the wall, nearly bouncing upon impact. The man laughed like he was lighting off fireworks at a barbecue. Gorman shook his head. “Corporal! Knock it off, this isn’t a game! Get your feet and move toward the entrance. Now!”
“Sorry, Sarge,” Vine replied. He complied with the order, making his way toward the door they planned to breach.

The other marines found a far more graceful landing, settling in and converging on the hatch. Gorman moved close and scanned it with his computer before getting Cassie back on the line. He needed her help if they were going to enter the facility without blowing the door wide open.

“I’m sending you what I got from the surface,” he said. “Can you get this open?”

“One moment,” Cassie said. “How’d you get there so fast? We thought the shuttle would have to deal with a few of the mines. I’m not reading any more explosions that way.”

“A few?” Gorman asked. “Try dozens. Jeb’s waiting for us to get inside before he clears the path for pick up.”

“Oh my … Understood.” Cassie paused. “I think I’ve found the door. What about now?”

Nothing seemed to happen, and Anderson said, “Wrong one. I saw an oxygen blow about three yards that way. Want to huff it? Shouldn’t take long.”

“Damn.” Cassie hummed. “Hold on, I’ll get the right one. No need to leave. Okay … How about now?”

The hatch opened, air burst out in white plumes. “That did it,” Gorman said. “We’re entering now.”

“Don’t take your helmets off,” Cassie warned. “Just in case. I regulated the environment but let’s not test it unless it becomes absolutely necessary, huh?”

“Totally get it.” Gorman entered first, drawing his weapon. The others joined him, and they hit the panel by the outer hatch. It closed with a hiss. A square lit up beside the next door and it opened to the inner deck. “What about defenses? Were you able to detect any? Shut them off?”

“I can’t tell,” Cassie replied. “I hoped the whole station would be open to remote control, but the network has a bunch of hardened systems I can’t access. If they have defenses, I guarantee they’ll be behind those. However, I was able to upload a map. Follow the guide to your destination and we’ll be good to go.”

“Fantastic.” Gorman turned to Heat. “You want me to lead the way?”

“You’ve been doing a great job so far,” Heat replied. “Watch his back and keep it cautious. We want to be out of here as quickly as possible but not at the expense of being blown away by some ancient turret still online. Fall out.”

***

Anna’s Charger Squadron met the enemy head on, each side passing close with a swath of weapon-fire filling the sky. A lot of bad shots ensured no one took any damage as they reorganized and banked, preparing for some real dogfighting. Fortunately, the capital ship left them alone, moving off to meet the Gnosis.

After watching the flight recordings from Mustang, Anna knew what to expect but experiencing their insane maneuvers in person was seriously different. As she came around to what she figured would be a perfect firing solution, her target dove suddenly, a swift motion that would’ve made one of her pilots black out.

They’re even more maneuverable in space then. Somehow, these people found a way to practically eliminate all G force, ensuring they could hop around at wild angles. This gave them a solid advantage but not an insurmountable one. Anna knew they needed to fly smarter, more defensively but also with less regard for personal comfort.

This fight will probably leave some bruises. As she pulled around and kicked in her thrusters, the safety straps tightened about her shoulders painfully. The universe wants me to know just how right I am.

A series of blasts nearly caught Anna right in the nose and she yanked back on her flight stick to avoid the attack. It still singed her shields in the rear, causing a brief red blip on her HUD. The shields went from forty percent back up to eighty in short order and she was able to level out.

Mustang One flew past her, two fighters on his tail. His wingman was zeroing in on one of them and fired guns, ripping through the shields and catching the engines on fire. Orange globes burst from the damage and the ship turned into a blob a moment later before winking out into nothingness.

Apparently, they've got this under control. Anna redirected her attention to catching a target of her own. She moved in behind one of the fighters, trying to keep her distance. The moment they drew too close, the enemy went crazy, pulling off wild moves to escape an attack. Holding back seemed to give them some sort of false sense of security.

It's like they don't think we can aim or something.

Anna locked on and fired her beam weapons but only one of them hit. The blow took down her target's shields, but it spun to the left to escape further damage and instead crashed directly into one of his allies. Finally, their ridiculous flying got them into trouble as both ships exploded in a single bright flash.

That's why you can't rely on those types of maneuvers in a dense dogfight. Anna repositioned, diving below the action to avoid a skirmish dead ahead. Kicking in the afterburners, her computer warned her about someone taking her tail. She tapped her com to ping her wingman and Frank's immediate reply gave her some confidence.

"I'm on my way but keep moving to the left. He doesn't have an angle yet."

"Got it." Anna complied, keeping an eye on the scanner superimposed over the canopy. The ship was gaining on her, but it still seemed to be just off center. Frank's signal appeared suddenly, and he fired a volley at her pursuer. The resulting explosion brightened her cockpit and she spun around to form up with him. "Thanks for that."

"No problem," Frank replied. "I think—" The rest of his comment was cut off as something hit his ship from the top, slamming into the body of the fighter. His shields fended it off, but a quick scan showed the system had dropped completely. "Wow, that was bad … Um … There's someone above me." He dove to avoid further attack.

Anna spun, gritting her teeth as her head swam from the pressure. She continued moving backwards and fired at the offending ship, letting loose several blasts before deploying a missile. It made the ship fly off, but she wasn't sure if she got them or not. Turning back around, she joined Frank's wing.

"Damage report," Anna called out. "How're you doing?"

“Shields are down,” Frank replied. “They won’t be back without some work. Automated repair is down. Engines are only getting fifty percent power. Weapons … Well, beams are down. I’ve still got guns.”
“We have to get you back to the Gnosis. You’re not doing anyone any good out here in that state.” Anna looked around, checking the scanner to see where the rest of her squadron was. “Chargers Three and Four, I need escort back to the ship. Can you converge on my position ASAP?”
“Negative, Charger One,” Charger Four, Jonny Calloway replied. “We are fully engaged.”
“I’ll take you back myself,” Anna said. “Get out head of me, Frank. I’ll hold them off.”
They started back toward the ship and two enemies showed up a moment later. Damn it, are you kidding me? Come on, guys! We’re leaving! “You see those?”
“Yeah, unfortunately,” Frank said. “I’m going full speed here with what I’ve got.”
Anna checked, and it wasn’t even half speed when the engines were fully functional. “Have you diverted all remaining power to engines?”
“Can’t really … Very little’s working.”
“Understood.” Anna sighed. “I’m going to engage them. Just … keep moving and don’t look back.”
“I’ll do my best.”
Anna spun around and charged the two pursuing pilots, firing her guns as she went. The attack caused the two to separate and break off, buying Frank at least a little time. Unfortunately, they went after Anna with a serious vengeance, turning their dogfight into a wild dance of snap shots and tight maneuvers.
Anna avoided a blast, banked left and hit her retro-thrusters to not collide with one of them. As they flew past, she pulled up and discharged mass drivers but pulled a clean miss. She didn’t have time to reposition, instead initiating a barrel roll and climbing as the two ships tried to take her down with some concentrated fire.
The entire scenario probably hadn’t lasted thirty seconds but she felt like she’d been fighting them for eternity. Pure instinct and endurance

carried her through the actions, and it registered deep in her mind that any motion, any minor miscalculation might well be her last. Even as she returned fire and kept them busy, she didn't have any illusions that she could win.

An explosion nearby knocked Anna off course and she had to struggle with the flight stick to regain control. "Looked like you needed some help," Mustang Five called out. Alicia Quinn. "I've got company too but at least the odds are even. Good luck, Charger One."

"Thanks," Anna replied while catching her bearings. The second ship continued to hound her but without his companion, the fight become far easier to manage. She slowed down to draw him closer, taking a risk. As he approached, she banked hard, wincing this time from the pain in her shoulders. His attack flew past, nearly taking her tail off. She returned to her previous course as the enemy flew past her and she had a solid view of his tail. Firing beam weapons first, she caught his shields and they seemed to shatter in a brilliant purple light. It dove but the move seemed sluggish, not nearly as quick as she'd seen so far.

Pursuing him was easy and without much effort, Anna found herself with another solid firing solution. A second before she pulled the trigger, the ship stopped suddenly. Panic filled her stomach and she pulled up at the last second. The bottom of her fighter scraped the enemy, cutting right through her shields.

Alarms went off, indicating a minor hull breach. Automated repair erected a forcefield to keep the cabin secure, but more damage reports flooded in. Her opponent was down, the scans showed he must've exhausted last of his power when he pulled his full stop so at least he wasn't shooting at her.

If anyone else does, I'm done. Damn it! "Charger Squadron, this is Charger One, I am severely damaged. Report."

"Charger Two, I'm nearly back to the Gnosis. No contacts nearby."

The rest of the pilots reported they were engaged with the enemy. Luckily, she still had enough power to get out of the combat zone. Providing no one pursued her the way they did Frank, she might make it. Jamming the thrusters forward, she made a break for the safety of

the Gnosis. Only then did she catch sight of the ships coming after her. Wow, I really pissed these guys off. Maneuvers would be tricky with her damage, but she needed to do something to get out of there. They closed in and started firing. She avoided the first couple shots, but the controls became more and more sluggish until they barely responded at all. I'm not making it back in this ship.

"Punching out," Anna called. "I'm ejecting." She slammed the button and held her breath. A pop beneath her sent the life pod well away from the rest of the ship. It exploded a moment later as the enemy tore through it and she began to tumble. The world outside became a blur as darkness hovered on the edge of her vision.

Anna tapped in her SOS and tapped the thruster controls to slow her spin. Much as she wanted to pass out, doing so would likely mean death. If the life pod didn't level out, at least more than it was, her internal organs would be scrambled by the time someone found her. Not to mention scans indicated she was floating straight toward the enemy.

The first two taps of her controls, she went the wrong direction and temporarily made things worse. Straining, she pressed down hard to go the opposite direction. It leveled her out enough so she could relax, even a little. The next step involved compelling the pod back toward the Gnosis. A warning blared in her ears and it took a moment for the words to register.

Ten percent fuel warning. The limited amount of pressure built up for the thrusters was meant to do little more than what Anna had already done. Ultimately, she knew she only had enough to slow her momentum, not change it completely. It was better to buy some time than do nothing but her head continued to swim, making it hard to concentrate.

Expelling the rest of her fuel took one last press of the button and she slumped in the seat, utterly exhausted. Voices piped in over her com but she couldn't reply, couldn't understand them. They were there, hovering on the peripheral of her senses until blackness took her completely.

***

“Casualties are coming in,” Vincent announced. “From the pilots.”
Desmond nodded but didn’t reply immediately. They were on the verge of exchanging blows with the enemy ship. Salina tried to parlay but they didn’t seem interested in a conversation. They continued to advance, weapons hot and defenses at the ready. Whatever they wanted, they were willing to kill for it.
This can’t be over the situation back at the planet. Desmond narrowed his eyes in thought. We tried to help those people, but they refused. I’m guessing they aren’t much of a revenge group anyway. Their mercenary mentality seems bent on stealing the information we received. Thayne did say they deleted some data. Maybe they’re hoping to take it back.
“We’re in range,” Zach said. “Permission to fire.”
Desmond hesitated for only a moment, just long enough to see the enemy’s weapon light up. Their beam weapon missed but that was enough to warrant hostility. “Fire at will, Zach.”
The deck hummed as Zach unleashed a swath of destruction, beam weapons and mass drivers together. Energy blasts would hit first followed closely by the chunks of metal. With any luck, the first would cut through their shields and they’d do some damage in their first pass. Desmond wasn’t hopeful.
Scans indicated they were evenly matched, so the fight might take some time.
“Direct hit,” Zach called. “Enemy shields held. Taking some evasive action and readying our next shot.”
The enemy returned fire, this time connecting with the Gnosis even as it moved. “Shields absorbed that shot,” Salina called. “No damage to any systems. Port defenses are down to eighty-five percent. I’m diverting power to bring them back up, but the emitters are giving me some trouble.”
“Are the fighters holding their own?” Desmond asked. “Or are we in trouble there?”
“They’re doing a lot of damage,” Vincent replied, “but we’ve got two

down, including Charger One."
Desmond hummed. "I think we need to risk the bombers. Keep them close to the ship so our turrets can provide some backup. They can throw some ordnance while we do and that should make shorter work of the situation."
Vincent called down to the hangar for the bombers to launch. He turned back to Desmond. "Too bad we can't find an effective way to use those mines."
"Not without taking a dramatic risk." Desmond hummed, considering the options. He shook his head. "I think we've got this. They haven't pulled out anything besides fighters, so we might still have an advantage over them." The ship rumbled again. "Zach, I thought you were pulling evasive action."
"I've been trying to," Zach replied as he fired again. "But they seem to have some kind of lock on us. It instantly diverts their weapons as we move. Even the harsher maneuver I pulled a moment ago wasn't enough to avoid a shot."
"Cassie?"
"I'm working on the station," Cassie replied. "Salina, can you look?"
"They do have a signal hitting the hull." Salina paused. "I'm trying to jam it. Wait a moment … I'm picking up an energy reading from the planet near the station. Um …It's actually disrupting the signal before I could do anything. Oh boy … It's messing with our sensors too. Are you seeing this, Cassie?"
"Yes," Cassie replied. "And it's not good. I'm not going to be able to help the marines directly right now. I'm still on the com so I can walk through stuff, but our connection to the probes has been severed. Damn it!"
"Give me more details about this new reading," Desmond said. "Can you determine the source?"
"Seems to be coming from within the core." Salina sighed. "But I can't make out much … The interference is intense. I'm working on a way around it."
"The enemy's falling back," Zach said. "Permission to pursue?"
"Hold on." Desmond leaned forward. "Hail them again, Salina."

“Um … They’re picking up this time.”
“This is Captain Desmond Bradford of the Earth ship Gnosis. We’re on a peaceful exploration mission out here. Cease fire so we can talk this out.”
The computer translated the voice, “We’re not here to talk, Captain. You took something from that planet you visited and we want it back along with the scientist Gil Vaedra. I believe you have him aboard.”
“I’m not giving you anything,” Desmond replied. “You’re not in any position to negotiate. I happen to know that your targeting advantage just got taken away by the energy build-up from that planet. Stand down and let us conclude our mission. We’ll let you do whatever you want here.”
“You don’t understand, we’re not asking. We’re insisting. I need that technology and the doctor. He owes us a great deal. You’ve meddled with us enough. If not for what you hold, I’d blow you out of this system immediately and salvage what I wanted. However, considering the circumstances and what’s happening here, I decided to be merciful.”
Desmond scowled. “Pray tell. What’s happening?”
“That build-up won’t stop. Whatever fools you sent to the station must’ve woken it up. This sector’s even more forbidden than the last you invaded. That will lead to quite the chain reaction and no one’s going to want to be here when it goes off.”
Desmond muted the conversation and turned to Salina. “Confirm what they’re saying?”
Salina shrugged. “I wish I could. It makes sense. The power is building. Obviously, it can only get so high before something happens. Even if it only blows up all the mines, that could be bad. Let alone the other satellites around here.”
“When will it reach critical mass?” Vincent asked.
“Less than fifteen minutes if my calculations are correct,” Salina replied. “And … I’m pretty sure they’re right. The structure of the planet isn’t strong enough to contain it. In fact, I think somehow that place has been turned into a bomb. The marines probably want to hurry if we have any hope of getting out of here in time.”

“Cassie, give them the bad news,” Desmond said. He unmuted the line. “Listen, we know what’s going to happen. Doesn’t it stand to reason we work together to get out of here? Honestly, what’s the point of fighting anymore?”

Zach moved the ship suddenly, narrowly avoiding another attack. “I don’t think they’re interested in talking anymore.”

Desmond shook his head. “Okay, if that’s the way we have to do it.” He killed the connection. “You’re on free fire again, Zach. Vincent, did we get the bombers launched?”

“Yes, sir,” Vincent replied. “They’re out there and ready.”

“They have authority to open fire. Salina, plot us a course out of here. We might be dropping into hyperspace in quite the hurry when the marines get back.” Desmond drew a deep breath. “We’re all about efficiency right now, folks. No wasted actions and total focus. If we want to get out of here alive, everyone needs to bring their A game.”

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Chapter 11

Heat glanced over his shoulder as they made their way into the first corridor. The others seemed on edge and he didn't blame them. Though they were in a facility that didn't look remarkably different from any other sort of high tech building they'd been in, something still felt alien and strange.

Smooth walls carried a bright sheen to them, almost as if something like mercury writhed just beneath the surface. As they advanced beyond the airlock into a larger hallway, it became more unnerving. The hatch behind them closed and blended in perfectly with the rest of the wall. Only a glowing rectangle the size of a hand beside it gave any indication it was there at all.

Light seemed to emanate from the seams of the walls, bright enough to illuminate the entire area but without a definite source. The material picked up whatever glow came out and reflected it along the corridor, enhancing it until everything around them was clearly visible.

Gorman led them around a curve and they paused before another smooth wall. He fiddled with his computer and another rectangular section glowed before the wall parted, another door allowing them entrance to a corridor exactly the same as the one they were leaving. If not for the map, there'd be no way to know they were progressing. We could be going in circles and have no idea. "Do we really know where we're going?" Heat asked. "Because if we get lost in here …"

"The map says this way," Gorman replied. "And Cassie just helped with the door so we're good."

Another hundred paces took them into an actual room. Though the walls, ceiling and floor mirrored the previous room, there were tables and chairs breaking up the empty space. They were shorter than what a human might use but not considerably. Shelves lined one of the walls and there were boxy protrusions, likely cabinets, on another.

Anderson spoke up, "Looks like some kind of break room or something, right?"

“Maybe,” Heat said. “Is there a computer in here we can use or do we have to keep pressing on?”
Gorman shook his head. “We need the main control room to get what we’re after but the door over here to our left might be on lockdown. It leads to what looks like a stairway, then we go up and push through one more locked down door. Another couple minutes and we should be downloading the info and ready to extract.”
Heat gestured. “Lead the way. Getting through the door is all you … and the girl in your head.”
“You know she’s sharing the com, right?” Gorman asked as he approached the door. “It’s not like she can’t hear you.”
“I am here,” Cassie replied. “But I’m ignoring everything but questions. You ready to get through the door?”
“I’m near it … Do you need me to do anything?”
“No,” Cassie said. “Hold on.”
Another panel lit up, this time red. It flashed several colors before sliding open. “See?” Gorman turned to the others. “Piece of cake so far. Nothing to worry about at all.”
The lights overhead changed, turning a deep red. The walls went from rippling silver to a deep blood tone and a high-pitched klaxon went off somewhere deep within the station. Heat and the other marines all stared at Gorman, none of them saying a word. Cassie’s voice broke their brief silence.
“What’s that sound?”
“Getting through this door set off an alarm,” Gorman replied. “We probably need to hurry. Can you shut it down?”
Cassie didn’t answer immediately but they heard her muttering over the line under her breath. After a moment, she cursed. “No, in fact, I’m not able to access anything over there now. There’s some kind of interference building up from the planet it looks like … Salina’s pulling a scan now but if you can hear me, the only thing we’ve got left is advice.”
“Shit,” Heat said, “so now we have to rely solely on Gorman’s tech skills?”
“I’m afraid so,” Cassie replied.

“Thanks for the confidence.” Gorman waved his hand at the others. “Come on, we have to hurry before this place locks down or something worse.”
“Automated defenses?” Vine asked. “Because I’m kind of tired of them.”
“You didn’t even go into the base last time,” Kelly said as they hurried through the door. “You can’t be tired of anything.”
“Stow it,” Heat grumbled. “Radio silence unless you have something useful to say.”
They rushed down a hallway which Heat had thought would be shorter based on Gorman’s description. He brought the map up for himself to see and noted they would be approaching another door shortly. At that point, they would be in a long, narrow hallway, forced to wait for the security to go down at an extreme disadvantage.
“Kelly, Vine … Get your asses back to the entrance of this hall and hold it.” Heat gestured. “You get contacts, let us know but hold the entrance. This is a death trap if we don’t have some advance notice.”
“On it,” Vine replied, leading the way.
“Gorman, you’d better get us through there fast,” Heat said. “For all our sakes.”
“I’m on it now.” Gorman leaned against the wall and began working on the computer. The klaxon continued to belt out the high pitch alarm all around them and if not for the sound suppression of their helmets, it would probably be painful. As it was, it simply became unnerving, especially considering how empty the station felt.
I genuinely thought we’d find some bodies here … Anything at all to show inhabitants. They couldn’t have possibly rotted into nothing, could they? Heat shook off the thought and directed his attention back down the hall to where he sent Kelly and Vine. He needed to worry about the threats in the present, not the deaths of the past.
When they got back to the ship safe and sound, they’d be able to delve into the data they took and discover what happened to the people there. Until then, it was moment to moment concerns and getting out of there. Anything else would be nothing more than a distraction.

***

Squadron Leader Nolan Coplan hadn't anticipated a need for the Rhino bomber squadron on this particular mission. They were at the ready when they entered the system but receiving the order to launch surprised them all. As they fell in beside the Gnosis, Nolan stared at the chaos raging before them.

The other two squadrons were heavily engaged and blasts from the capital ships made the distance between both exceptionally dangerous. Who knows when this system ever saw so much activity? The thought made his stomach tighten up with an oppressive dread. At one point, people lived there … an entire population and now, they were all gone.

Their dead space stations and vacant planets remained as the only markers for an entire species.

"Acquire targeting," Nolan spoke firmly, forcing his mind back to the present. "We're dropping two bombs a piece to test their defenses then we can coordinate with the Gnosis if we don't bring them down. Scans indicate decent shields, but we won't know how they react to our ordnance until we've made contact."

The enemy wasn't bothering with evasive maneuvers and as a stationary target, Nolan didn't have any trouble getting tone. He watched his HUD, holding until the rest of the squadron showed green. "Very good." His eyes narrowed, and he drew a deep breath. "Okay, team. Fire. Hit them."

The bombs popped out of the hull and hurled forward, rocketing toward their targets. Nolan gripped his flight stick tighter, eyes fixated on the scanner overlaying the canopy. The tiny blips approached the target but when they were less than three hundred feet from detonation, red beams burst from the enemy ship.

Each blip winked out one after another, annihilated by some type of defensive laser. "Did you see that?" Lieutenant Mariah Pine, Rhino Three, blurted out the question. "They got them all! Really? Half, I could see … a few more, but twelve? While fighting the Gnosis?"

"Settle down," Nolan replied. "Gnosis Control, did you see what just

happened?"
"Affirmative," Commander Bowman replied. "Fall back and wait for orders. Ensure your turret defenses are primed just in case."
"Understood." Nolan frowned, checking to see how the other ships were faring. They'd already lost three fighters, but the exchange had proven to be lopsided, favoring the Gnosis. According to battle reports, the enemy suffered more losses. Not enough to declare a victory but if they kept their focus, they'd likely come out on top.
We have to find a way to help. Nolan thought. We can't sit here waiting for our chance to throw more bombs their way. No … There must be something. He checked the area, focusing on the mines. Surely there had to be a way to use them. The Gnosis proved they were magnetic, attracted to anything the size of a fighter and above. The probes didn't attract them but maybe we can rig something … Our bombs are larger and they have a more concentrated metal. We can guide the ordnance and try to drag the mines toward the enemy.
Nolan offered his idea over to the Gnosis, sending it to Commander Bowman. He estimated it would take a minimum of five bombs to pull off his plan.
If they let us try it, I'll be surprised but considering the urgency of our situation, the captain might be ready for something potentially crazy.

***

"Contact!" Vine's report made Heat's stomach tighten. "Opening fire!"
"What do you see?" Heat asked. Weapons fire drowned out any response. "Repeat, I didn't copy."
"Some kind of automaton," Kelly replied. "On treads. Came through the door and immediately opened fire. We've taken cover just inside the corridor. It's using beam weapons only and my scans say they're … potentially non-lethal."
"But might shut down pieces of our armor," Vine added. Another burst of fire went off, this time from both marines. Heat considered sending someone else but held on, giving his men a chance. A moment of silence brought a quick report. "Hostile down. It was tough …"

“Gorman, how much longer?” Heat turned on the door. “That thing won’t be the only one out there.”
“I get it,” Gorman replied. “Give me a minute.”
“You’ve been at it for several.” Heat paused. “I’m heading down to see this thing. Let me know before you open the door.” He rushed down to Vine and Kelly, pausing at the door. A pile of smoldering wreckage sat in the middle of the room, pieces of metal scattered to the four walls. Dents in the wall indicated that their rounds wouldn’t go through.
“Told you it was down,” Vine said. “I scanned it. Thing was older than dirt. Several hundred years.”
“Talk about a serious warranty,” Kelly added.
“Enough.” Heat peered around the area, scowling. “That can’t be the only one.”
“Maybe not,” Vine agreed, “but considering how ancient it was, it might’ve been the only one still functioning.”
“Door’s about to open,” Gorman said. “Get down here.”
“Let’s fall out …” Heat gestured. “Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”
The others hustled down the corridor but he stayed put, temporarily lost in thought. Defenses were part of the hardened systems Cassie couldn’t hack before, so they didn’t have any idea how many things like the lumbering robot they had to worry about.
It didn’t seem to take a lot to bring down so that was something. He hurried back to the others, bringing Jeb up on the coms as he went.
“Are you nearly through?”
“Another few mines and we’ll be close enough for a pick up,” Jeb replied. “You guys done over there?”
“Not yet, sadly.” Heat arrived at the door. “We’re about to breach what we hope is the final area. Thank God we had enough data to find our way or we’d be wandering around this place for days.”
Jeb hummed. “Yeah, it looks pretty big. Give us another five minutes and we’ll be there.”
“I’ve got some more bad news,” Gorman said. “Cassie just informed me there’s a crazy energy build-up on the planet. It’s probably going to blow up.”

“Can this get any better?” Heat pointed at the door. “Open it then. We have to hurry like hell if we don’t want to be obliterated. Christ, I suddenly miss superstorms and ridiculous mutants.”
Never thought I’d say those words aloud.

***

Dennis took a shot to his starboard side as he tried to bank out of the way of a missile. The shields flared but held and he continued on his course to get away from the other enemy all over his tail. He led them back toward the Gnosis, hoping they’d be stupid enough to get close to the capital ship’s automated defenses.
I need a little cover from this guy. He’d been pursued for the last two minutes, constantly dogged and harassed. Shane tried to dislodge him but ended up with a problem of his own. They were temporarily separated but had a rendezvous point setup near the bombers. Even one of them could help at this point.
He hit the afterburners and made an all-out run for the ship. His opponent kept after him, firing again. Dennis tilted his ship, flying between the attack then banked again to make his profile more difficult to target.
“He’s still on you,” Shane called. “I got mine and am on my way but you’re going to have to do something pretty spectacular to shake him.”
“Tell me something I don’t know!” Another hit shook his ship and the shields dropped down to ten percent. “I can’t take another round but I’m almost there … Another ten seconds and he’ll be in range of their turrets.”
“Then pretend you’re Alicia,” Shane said. “Do something crazy.”
Dennis cursed under his breath and jammed the stick forward, instantly going into a steep dive. The moment he found himself on the new course, he banked to the left, then immediately pulled the stick up and to the right. It caused him to spin, making his vision darken and the safety belts dig deep into his skin.
The enemy shot passed him, near enough to the Gnosis that the

cannons kicked in. Several blasts chased Dennis's opponent for a moment before they caught him and tore up the vessel, turning it to a massive orange globe.
"That was tough." Dennis felt sick to his stomach and his head hurt. An alarm was buzzing in his ears, indicating that the shields were not coming back online. He checked the scanners and saw there were still seven enemy fighters out there, taking on nine Gnosis fighters.
Three ships were out of action for one reason or another and he wouldn't be of any help out there if he went back in. Furthermore, they had people requiring search and rescue. Considering the power build-up from the planet, they didn't have a lot of time for it. He wondered if the shuttles could survive a few shots while trying to grab their people for extraction.
"Shane, my ship can't handle any more. I'm even reading a power drain now."
"Get back to the ship," Shane said. "I'll take Mustang the rest of the way."
"We've got people down out here though … Maybe I can come back to help them."
"Do something," Shane replied. "I'll be out here and help as I can."
Dennis cursed and directed himself toward the hangar. He got Vincent on the line and let him know that he had to come back aboard but made the suggestion that he take out the search and rescue team personally to bring their people back. He was put on standby and he had a good minute before he'd board anyway.
Still, if they didn't hurry, they wouldn't be able to save anyone who had to punch out. Dennis couldn't think of a worse way or place to die. Lost and alone in a dead system, obliterated by an ancient booby trap. I have to do something. Hurry up, Vincent. We don't have time to deliberate.

***

Vincent got off the line and checked their battle status. They were still slugging it out with the enemy capital ship, exchanging blows. The

match was so even, neither side really experienced any appreciable damage. A couple shorts to minor systems didn't count. If either side wanted to win, something dramatic had to happen.

I don't even know if we can enter hyperspace straight out of combat. Vincent had studied FTL theory but none of his classes talked about what happened with full defenses engaged. Besides, they had people outside as Dennis pointed out and they needed to get them aboard somehow. Why are these people still fighting when they know we're all about to die?

Vincent addressed Desmond, "One of our pilots is coming aboard with a damaged fighter. He's asking permission to take search and rescue out to get our people back who are downed."

"Seems risky," Desmond replied. "Zach, turn thirty degrees to port and open fire again. I Focus all firepower on their shields at point … three-seven. Maybe precise shooting will take out their defenses sufficiently for the bombers to get them."

"On it, sir." Zach continued tapping away like he was playing the piano.

"I get it," Vincent said, "but I don't think we have a lot of choice. If we wait until the fight's over, it might be too late to bring them back on board. We'll have to just get out of here."

"If we win the fight." Desmond shook his head. "These Kalrawv idiots must know they're in as much danger as we are. Why are they pressing this? If we all die, no one gets the data."

"They're sore losers," Cassie said. "At least that's what Gil told me."

"Great …" Desmond rolled his eyes. "We're dealing with children. Did that work, Zach? Did you get through?"

"Negative, sir." Zach continued working through his report. "Dropped them down to sixty percent. I can't believe how tough their defenses are!"

"Ours seem to be in the same boat." Desmond sighed. "We need to take drastic action. Are the marines in position? Have they picked up the data yet?"

"They're almost to the control room now," Cassie reported. "I'm on with them but they're having to get through the defenses on their

own. That power build-up is interfering with our network connection."
"How long have you known that?" Desmond asked. "We're holding position here so you can access those probes. If we can move again, then we need to take some more extreme action."
"Sorry, sir." Cassie cleared her throat. "I didn't realize."
"Never mind. Zach … get ready to bring us around. I want a shot at their tail."
"I've received a request from the bombers," Vincent added. "Rhino One thinks they can attract some of the mines with their ordnance and lure it to the enemy. They'd remote control them and drag the things close enough to cause damage."
"Their first attack didn't help," Desmond said. "You know, even if they get it close enough that those maniacs take a shot at the thing it would work out. Permission granted. Zach, belay my last order. Keep our distance and let the bombers try their plan. If this looks like it's going to work, let me know right away, Vincent. This might be the nudge we need to win."

***

Nolan received permission to try his plan. He'd already briefed his people on the idea and explained what they would have to do. The precision control wouldn't be too difficult but if they messed up and crashed their bombs together, they'd have to start again. All six bombers would try it, which meant they had two chances to pull mines toward the enemy.
"One, Two and Three, we'll be controlling ours on the preplanned vector I uploaded to your computers. Four, Five and Six, yours is practically opposite. This should give us all plenty of room to make this happen. Let's fire on my mark and hope to God we've got enough fuel in these things to pull it off. Three … two … one … fire."
They deployed their guided bombs, sending them sailing off toward the mine field. Nolan focused on the computer to maneuver his bomb. The path was predetermined but using the touch screen, he could

make adjustments as it went, in the event manual control became necessary.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be necessary. Waiting for Commander Bowman gave Nolan plenty of time to plot a complex course and he uploaded it to the rest of his Squadron. Without the preplanning, his idea wouldn't have worked at all. The guidance systems on the bombs were sophisticated enough to make mild corrections but what he proposed went beyond their design.

Maybe if this works, we can add it to our repertoire.

Nolan held his breath as the bombs approached the mine field, staying close together. If they weren't a large enough target, nothing would happen. They would've wasted some ordnance but if they were, then the defenses would start pursuing them. Depending on how fast the magnetics compelled them, they might be able to race the devices to their intended target.

"Approaching the field now," Rhino Two, Micah Zane, reported in. "Scans indicate motion on the nearest device."

Nolan's heart pounded in his chest. Deep down, he doubted this plan would work but considering what else they were doing, it seemed like a better use of time than sitting. When scanners picked up motion in the field, that the two bombs managed to attract one of them, he dared to believe it was possible.

Rhino Four, Ronald Atherton, reported that their side also saw some motion. That was two mines nudged. Nolan's scans showed the mine began moving, following the bombs as they made their arc and started toward the enemy. Their momentum would have to carry them the last bit of distance as they'd be out of fuel long before they arrived.

As the mines began to move, they gave chase as if led along by a massive tether. They had a massive distance to travel but they were swift enough to cover the territory in a reasonable amount of time. Once they arrived, if they detonated as expected, the battle might end in a few minutes.

"Gnosis," Nolan reported in, "it appears our plan might be working. The mines are rapidly approaching the enemy and are tailing our weapons. I estimate less than five minutes before—"

A tremendous explosion interrupted his comment as one of the mines detonated. It took the bombs with it creating a bright flash that dazzled him, even though it happened off to his left and slightly behind him. It couldn't have caught up to the bombs that quickly but there was no way to know after the four devices were obliterated.
"What was that?" Vincent asked. "You broke up."
"We've got one mine left," Nolan said. "It's following the bombs … The first one went off. I don't know why."
"We see it on scans," Vincent replied. "That's … Well, I'm glad it's working. Surprised, but glad."
"Me too, sir." Nolan chewed his lip as sweat broke on his brow. His computer screen flickered as the interference from the planet increased. If this didn't work, he began to wonder if they might need to bug out of the system without the data they needed. He couldn't imagine leaving the marines behind but the whole ship couldn't be lost waiting.
Lord, this is going to be a tough call. I don't envy the captain.
He watched the screen intently, counting down the moments to see how far the mine would make it and if they had succeeded in their crazy plan. Fighter chatter filled his cockpit but everyone in Rhino Squadron sat quietly, holding their breath. Their plot may have been a long shot, but it was still in play and that counted for something.

***

The marines mounted the stairs and paused at the opening to another room, this one with far more smooth terminals sticking out of the walls. Gorman advanced, waving his computer about the room and speaking to Cassie. "I think we're in the control room for this section … I'm guessing each module has one, right?"
"That's probably correct," Cassie said. "But this should have the access we need. I hope. In any event, you've got to get the download going ASAP. We're running out of time in a major way."
"What do I do?"
"Get to the nearest terminal and crank on the network connection that

Gil set up." Cassie waited while he moved over to one of the silvery blocks coming out of the wall. Initiating the computer connection, a bright white dot flickered in the wall and a screen of sorts appeared, displaying foreign characters.
"I think it's working," Gorman said. "Or at least, something's happening. I hope it's good."
"I'm looking through the camera," Cassie replied. "You're in. The universal translator is preparing to copy it to a database. Jesus, there's a lot there! I doubt we're going to get everything … but at least we'll have something. Five minutes."
"Will we have enough time to get back?" Gorman asked.
"You should." Cassie sighed. "Though we'll be cutting it kind of close I think. The planet's building up to critical fast. I'd say we have less than twenty-five minutes to get out of here. In fact, I need to report that to the captain. Give me a moment."
Great, Gorman thought. Not at all terrifying. Less than half an hour to get out of here and we still aren't done with the copying. "Heat, you'd better get Jeb on the line and find out how long it'll take for him to get here. We're on a real time crunch now."
"How long?" Heat asked.
"Cassie just said less than twenty-five minutes."
"Good God." Heat cursed a few more times before bringing the pilot up on the open com. "You nearly here, man? Seriously, we're out of time for you to be playing around."
"We've finished clearing the path," Jeb said. "We can be at the station in about eight minutes."
"Should be okay," Heat said. "But from right now, we have to get back to the Gnosis in less than twenty-five minutes. Probably be better to be on board in twenty. Can you get us back there in that time?"
"If they come to meet us half way, we'll be fine." Jeb still sounded insanely calm. It made Gorman scowl. "Don't worry. We've got this."
"Your confidence is overwhelming," Gorman grumbled.
"Contact!" Kelly shouted. "More of those things coming down the hall … Two this time."
"Open fire," Heat said. "Suppress them if you have to. We need to buy

some more time to get this data then we can get the hell out of here. Gorman, if those are going to be a problem down there, we'll need another route to the hatch."
"I say we go out the nearest one," Gorman replied. "The shuttle can come to us and we can jump in."
"Ballsy, but okay." Heat fired his weapon.
Gorman wished he could join them. He didn't have a good angle for a shot but he kept the computer doing its work, watching the progress bar, desperately willing it to move quicker. I hate copying files so damn much!

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Chapter 12

Desmond clenched his fist, frustrated by their opponent. The idiots planned to fight to the bitter end, dying without their prize. Why? It didn't make any sense. How did they lack all self-preservation? The Gnosis had attempted to talk about it, but they had declined. Maybe they'd be willing to fight in the next system over … At least then there wouldn't be a deadline.

As he considered their options for talking, Vincent reported that the mine gambit the bombers came up with might actually be working. Three of the bombs, seemed to be enough to drag the device around. Getting it back to the enemy seemed like a long shot but it was getting closer.

Meanwhile, Squadron Leader Arden had departed the ship in a search and rescue shuttle to recover the life pods of his fellow pilots. The man deserved a commendation for his bravery and Desmond would certainly make the suggestion. Everyone involved in the operation stepped up to peak efficiency.

We don't have a choice, all things considered.

Zach cursed and the ship shook. Salina called out the shields took a big hit, dropping them down to twenty percent near the crew quarters area. Life support in several of the rooms had been damaged. The hull had not been compromised but there was a weak spot they'd need to tend to before anyone could stay in that section.

"I hope you intend to give back as good as we got," Desmond said.

"Everything I've got," Zach muttered, hitting the panel harder than necessary. The ship shook as he deployed another volley, this time connecting with every shot. The enemy shields turned bright blue, settling in as a dash of orange blotted their hull for a moment. "Direct freakin' hit."

"Damage?" Desmond asked.

Salina replied, "Can't say what systems were impacted but the concussion of the shot did scuff the hull. I'm reading some power surges but they're getting under control."

“The mine’s approaching,” Vincent said. “Those bombs are going to hit too.”
“Captain.” Cassie cleared her throat before continuing. “Hate to be the bearer of bad news but … Well…”
“What is it?” Desmond snapped. “We don’t have time.”
“The planet’s going to reach critical mass in less than twenty-three minutes … At that point, I’m afraid it’ll explode in a spectacular fashion.” Cassie paused a moment. “In fact, I’m not sure what’s going to survive if that happens. We really need to get out of here before then.”
“How long to get the marines back here?” Desmond asked. “They need to pull out now.”
“Roughly ten minutes,” Vincent said. “If we can meet them, that would help.”
“Can our pilots disengage and get back here?” Desmond stood. “We need to abort this operation and get the hell out of here before it’s too late.”
“I’ll see what we can do,” Vincent replied. “They’ll have to do it cautiously.”
Desmond moved over to Zach’s console and checked the navigation. They plotted a hyperspace route to the next system away, preparing them to leave. Unfortunately, they’d have to make the trip under duress with the Kalrawv Group not showing any signs of giving up their attack.
“When the marines report that they’re on their way back, disengage and move to meet them.” Desmond drew a deep breath. “I want them on board ASAP. Begin the countdown for hyperspace, Zach. Salina, inform the crew we’re about to get out of here and to strap down if they can. Those who can’t … Hold on. We’re in for a bumpy ride for a while.”

***

Dennis caught two of the drifting life pods before he received the abort order. Squadron Leader Anna Jager and Flying Officer Simon

Gell were attached to his shuttle. The last person to find was on his own Charger Squadron, Flying Officer Corey Parks. Finding them proved easy enough but the enemy harassed him twice.

A combination of turrets and other pilots helped drive them off. Shane escorted his vessel as he looked but the last person, Corey, might remain at large out there if he couldn't find him fast. "Do you have any location on that pod?" Dennis asked the open com net. "Corey Parks … he's out here somewhere."

He received a lot of negatives but one of the bombers, Rhino Four, called out a visual. "He's drifted this way. I've got visual. Scanning …" Dennis diverted his course in that direction, his heart hammering in his chest. He needed to make it fast, but he couldn't accelerate too much with the extra weight of two pods. More enemy ships moved toward him but were driven back by a formation of Charger Squadron, hitting one of their targets with concentrated beam fire.

It took the vessel down, blowing it into a red ball. A missile flew by overhead less than thirty feet from his cockpit, a friendly attack that clipped one of the Kalrawv fighters and sent it spinning into the capital ship's shields. The ship itself exploded but that's where the damage ended. This is getting insane.

"Bad news," Rhino Four said. "I'm not getting any life readings on that pod."

No! Dennis screamed the word in his mind and increased the pace as much as he dared. As he closed in, he saw the pod and noted black scorch marks on the hull. His own scan confirmed the report about Corey's state. If I can get him back to the Gnosis, they might be able to help. He may not be gone.

The search and rescue crew did their part and got the pod attached magnetically to the hull and they started back for the Gnosis. The abort order came a second time, mostly aimed at the fighters. They were still tangling with the enemy so breaking away would be a stressful prospect.

Hurrying back, the Gnosis was already falling back toward the mine field. Dennis heard chatter over the radio about a gambit from the bomber squadron, that they were trying to use a mine to turn the tide

of the battle. He didn't know how it was going but knew whatever they were up to would have to be over shortly, especially if they were all going.
"Gnosis, this is search and rescue," Dennis said. "I've got the pods and am requesting landing clearance."
"Granted," Commander Bowman himself answered. "Tower's online and ready to get you in. Board immediately. We'll be dropping to hyperspace soon, so you'll want to ensure you're secure before that happens."
That power build-up must mean serious business. Okay then … I hope we can help you, Corey. Sorry it took so long.

***

Nolan received the abort message twenty seconds before the mine would make it to its destination. I'm sure they'd rather us finish this up with such a short time left. The mine was nearly there, moving toward the Kalrawv Group vessel with a slow, determined purpose. They got it close enough that the bombs were no longer necessary to pull it.
The hull of the enemy did the rest, but the enemy defenses kicked in, taking out the projectiles safely before firing on the mine. While the device didn't make it to their hull, the resulting explosion brightened the entire area and was close enough to wreak havoc on their vessel. Shields dropped instantly and electrical sparks danced across the hull. Lights along the surface flickered and went out before coming back on. Nolan was too relieved it worked to celebrate and instead directed his people back toward the Gnosis. We probably just bought ourselves an easy trip out of here but at least it worked.
The enemy fighters disengaged as their capital ship began to turn in place, seemingly disengaging from the battle. This afforded the Gnosis fighters a chance to get out without being shot in the back. "Return to base, folks," Nolan announced. "Before we have to wait in line for all those fighter jockeys. Pretty sure we're on our way home."

***

“Captain!” Vincent shouted, pointing at the screen. “The mine! They got it to detonate near the Kalrawv ship!”
Desmond looked up briefly then turned to Salina. “Damage?”
“Severe,” Salina replied. “Shields are down … They’re withdrawing.”
“I guess we just had to bloody their nose enough to push them away.”
Desmond scowled at the screen, considering his next move. “Put them on the com again.”
Salina huffed in surprise. “It appears they are hailing us. On the open channel.”
“Captain Bradford.” The computer translated in the same tone it always used but Desmond sensed nerves in the voice, a strain of stress. “We admit this battle is in your hands today and we are withdrawing.”
“Too bad it had to come down to this,” Desmond said. “We didn’t have to fight it out.”
“Our people rarely negotiate, and we will continue to hunt for Doctor Vaedra. But today, we all receive a reprieve.”
Cassie called Desmond over and pointed at her screen. A large part of the Kalrawv ship broke off and the fighters attached to it. They moved away from the primary hull and started moving toward the edge of the system. “That’s basically the engine compartment and living quarters I think.”
“Interesting … I guess they were too damaged to go into hyperspace otherwise.”
“Good luck, Captain Bradford,” a static filled comment broke through the speakers. “If you survive this place, we’ll meet again, I’m sure.”
“Want to give chase?” Zach asked.
“No, we have our own problems.” Desmond pointed at Vincent. “How many pilots are back on board?”
“All of them but Jeb and the marines,” Vincent replied.
“We’ve got twelve minutes left,” Cassie said.
Desmond shook his head. “I hope that pilot is as good as you say, Vincent. He’s going to have to seriously haul ass to get back here.”

“Believe me, sir,” Vincent said, “he’s pretty ridiculous. If anyone can clear that distance in time, it’ll be him.”

***

Heat continued firing, taking down another of the treaded automatons. The enemy weapons scorched the walls, causing static to dance in the air. Two at a time came down the corridor, firing the moment they had anyone in visual. Vine took a shot to the arm, but it didn’t slow him down so much as blacken the metal of his armor.
“Gorman!” Heat shouted. “Do we have an exfiltration point? We ain’t going back the way we came!”
“Yes,” Gorman replied. “Close by too. Three rooms away at most. Doors are open and we’ll need to get through the air lock.”
“Screw the airlock!” Kelly yelled. “Let’s just blow it!”
“We’d be tossed outside and not have any control,” Vine called back. “Not the best plan.”
Heat shot another of the robots in what he assumed was the control center, mostly because it vaguely resembled a head. The dome lulled back and the robot kept coming until Vine blasted it in the torso. The unit exploded, shrapnel embedding in the walls. A decent sized chunk flew past Heat’s head and stuck in the ceiling a good two inches.
“Wow, those things are really popping.” Heat checked his scanner but it was still messed up. He had no idea how many more might be coming. “Gorman, are we going to die here or what? Status!”
“I’m just about done!” Gorman grunted back. “Wait! We’re good! Let’s go! Come on!”
“Fall back,” Heat shouted. “Follow Gorman!”
They hurried away from their cover and across the room, bursting through the door into a hallway barely large enough for them to get through in their power armor. Heat let them go first and tried to close the door behind them but couldn’t figure it out. Instead, he moved backwards, aiming his weapon at the entrance in the event one of the robots tried to squeeze in.
Just as they reached the next chamber, Heat saw something glisten

and fired. It was just the wall, that strange undulating metal texture. Damn, this place is unnerving!

“The airlock is just over here!” Gorman arrived at a smooth wall and started working at his computer. “This … shouldn’t take long.”

“Good,” Kelly said. “We haven’t had long for like three days.”

“Stow it,” Gorman muttered, tapping away at his computer. A rectangle lit up and the wall parted, revealing another tiny room. “We’re through!”

Heat turned to check the opposite way of where they’d come. The hallway was wider there and he saw another robot round the corner. “Pile in!” He called out, firing his weapon. He caught his target on the weaponized arm, blowing it into pieces. Sparks exploded from its side and it turned, bumping into the wall repeatedly.

Piling into the airlock, the door closed and Gorman worked the next one. “Jeb!” Heat shouted. “You’d better be here, man!”

“You’ll see me,” Jeb replied. “Jump when you’re free and we’ll meet up. Then, we’re in for one hell of a ride back to the Gnosis, believe me.”

Heat shook his head and watched Gorman expectantly. The man tapped at the computer quickly, entering a similar code over and over. Just as Heat was about to say something, the door opened and all the air fled the chamber. Their boots sealed to the ground and the emptiness of space sat just outside.

The shuttle hovered nearby, not quite five hundred yards away. Not a great distance, but enough to make their trip exciting. Heat directed the others to go ahead of him and he jumped last, engaging his thrusters. Flying toward their salvation felt like it was taking forever. The ship grew slowly at first until they were within fifty yards.

They had to spin in place, each one slowing down so they didn’t hit the thing like a slow-moving missile. The back was open and Kelly landed first, getting out of the way for the others. Heat touched the ramp and Gorman grabbed his arm just as Jeb hit the thrusters. The ramp didn’t even close before they were nearly at full speed and the marines struggled to strap in.

“Hold on to something,” Jeb said. “They’re going to hit hyperspace the

second we land so … that's something new."
Something new. Heat shook his head. Jeb had a way of making anything seem understated. It was a gift, one the man came by without effort. How he became so calm, no one really understood but if ever the man got shot down, he'd probably just say he'd never tried it before and make the best of it.
Heat turned to look out the window, noting the distant mines whizzing by. They were flying fast enough that the pressure held him tight into his seat. Scans still weren't working but he tapped into the camera of the shuttle, noting their distance to the Gnosis. A timer also ticked down, showing five minutes.
"What's the timer, Jeb?"
"Countdown to when we die," Jeb replied. "We're going to make this tight."
"How tight?"
"Like … two minutes tight." Jeb chuckled. "Sorry that we can't make it more cinematic and pull in a five second or less thing. But hey, we're talking about faster than light travel. We probably can't get out of here fast enough for that drama to work. Am I right?"
"You're an idiot," Gorman said. "And you probably need to be checked for how relaxed you are all the time."
"I was," Jeb said. "Psych said she needed to get some of what I had. Turned out she was uptight too. Now, if you'll excuse me, this is going to take some maneuvering concentration. One moment."
Heat watched the camera display in his helmet intently, chewing his lip. He didn't want to be blown up by the planet, but he started to worry that Jeb might crash into the Gnosis. He wasn't slowing down while heading straight for the hangar. He heard him tell tower control to clear the deck, that he was coming in hot.
Christ, that's going to be lovely.
The timer showed three minutes and twenty seconds. The Gnosis was less than three hundred yards away and closing fast. As the shuttle drew near, Jeb hit the retro-thrusters and they were all jostled in their seats, the straps barely keeping them contained. Heat closed his eyes tightly against the force, gripping his seat until his suit bent the metal.

The shuttle stopped suddenly and everything went still. Jeb chuckled again, calling back to the others, “was that a ride or what, fellas? Welcome home!”
I’d give that man hell if I didn’t feel like taking a nap, Heat thought. That or I’ll offer him a hug. I’m not sure which.

***

“Marines are aboard,” Vincent said.
“Hit it, Zach.” Desmond pointed. “Get us out of here.”
Zach initiated the hyperspace jump. Desmond watched the scanner, noting all they had was the build-up of energy, no other readings. It nearly reached what Cassie and Salina agreed to call critical. They had a minute and a half to go, if that. As space around them warbled, the dipped-out moments after a bright flash occurred to the left.
Once in hyperspace, Desmond slumped in his chair for half a moment before sitting up straight. He didn’t have time to be relieved and needed to understand their casualties, determine if they got what they were after and ensure they could get home when they emerged at the other system.
Work’s not done … despite surviving one of the scariest moments ever.
“How’re we doing?” Desmond asked Salina. “Everything okay?”
“Minimal damage … Our fighters experienced quite a lot. Those ships are going to take some repairs and we’ve got some casualties to contend with as well. Full report will be in your mailbox in the next half hour.”
“Thank you.” Desmond turned to Vincent. “You’ve got the bridge. I’m going to do a visual check of the other departments and visit the marines.” He boarded the elevator and leaned against the wall, allowing himself a moment to relax. Tension seized his shoulders and his heart finally started to slow down.
We had less than two minutes to live. The thought kept bouncing around his head. Even having escaped it, that time frame was frightening. Most of the crew probably had no idea how close they

were to dying, to be annihilated by a detonating planet. He wondered how fast it would travel to them.

Desmond hoped they succeeded and that such a risk proved to be of some value. He hated the idea that they had to walk away with nothing. If they failed to acquire the data, he couldn't blame the Kalrawv Group. They made it harder to leave but they didn't have anything to do with the alarm.

Who sets up such a booby trap? What was the purpose? Desmond hoped they had something to explain the concept of blowing up a world to deal with trespassers. To call it extreme would be the biggest understatement since saying space was dangerous. He disembarked and headed for the hangar, too tired to be hopeful.

At least we survived. If nothing else, I can say we got through the toughest event I've ever faced.

Captain Bradford recognized his thought might also be a dramatic understatement.

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Epilogue

Cassie sat in one of the tech labs, waiting for a meeting to start. After they emerged from hyperspace, they set about picking up the pieces of the hasty departure and assessed their casualties. Numerous injuries plagued the ship and there were a few deaths. Considering the mission, it was a miracle they came away relatively unscathed.

The data recovered from the station provided Thayne and Gil with plenty of work. They put it through a translator, which ran for nearly five hours before returning legible information. Cassie arrived first to look through it followed by Salina. Together, they started piecing together a story of what happened.

They planned to give a briefing to the senior officers in anticipation of a more intense meeting when they returned to Earth.

The Kalrawv Group seemed to be just as big of a threat as the Tol'An, perhaps more so considering the way they fought. They seemed prepared to die to capture Gil and the data. Perhaps they had a plan to escape, some method to get away. Whatever the case, she gave them a lengthy write-up to give to her superiors.

Such an organization definitely warranted scrutiny and as much observation as they could muster.

Salina ran a long-range scan back to the system they had narrowly escaped. The planets and all the stations were obliterated by the explosion. What remained of the dying star would likely wink out in the near future. The whole area became little more than dead space, total emptiness.

The detonation itself came from some sort of device, a powerful piece of technology which drew upon what was left of the star. Cassie thought about the threat which would spawn such a doomsday weapon. The culture must've been particularly worried if they elected to have their world destroyed.

Unfortunately for them, their plan didn't work, at least not back then. Maybe it was their parting shot, a long reaching snub to a future species who dared to excavate their home. Something told Cassie that

wasn't the case. They had a reason for what they did which was more immediate.

The data from the station might well prove it.

Vincent showed up first, pausing as he entered the door to offer her a nervous smile. "Hey there," he muttered. "You been waiting long?"

Cassie shook her head. "Not really. How're things going?"

"Good. We're almost ready to get out of here and head home. Fighters are being repaired and we've got everything stowed. Should be an uneventful trip, all things considered."

"That'll be nice." Cassie brushed her hair back and leaned on the table. "Maybe we'll get some downtime when we get back. Kinda doubt it … but I'm choosing to be hopeful."

"Me too," Vincent agreed. "Speaking of which … I was wondering … you know, when we get back …"

Captain Bradford stepped in, interrupting whatever Vincent was going to say. The commander stood up and nodded his head before Desmond took a seat. "Hope I wasn't interrupting anything."

"No, sir," Vincent said. "We were just chatting."

"Will Thayne and Gil be joining us? Or Salina?"

"We're here!" Thayne called as he and Gil entered the room. "Sorry for the tardiness. We were conferring with Engineer Webber on a few important matters. I believe you're all here to discuss the information we have procured and what it means for your people. I'm excited to say I know why the Tol'An are trying to combine the Orbs … However, they may be misguided."

"Do tell." Desmond's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward in his seat, hands clasped on the table.

"That station you were able to infiltrate was the last remnant of technology of an ancient species who called themselves Grax. They had spread to all the planets of their solar system, much like the others we saw. In some period of time long before the Pahxin even looked up at the sky and wondered if they could get there, these people traveled the stars.

"They met the cultures near to them, even going so far as to assist them with their own development. Though we have seen they did not

advance so far as the Grax, they were able to colonize worlds. Furthermore, contact seemed to die down between them. They exchanged ideas from afar but did not spend much time visiting one another. Exploration slowed."

"So what happened?" Desmond asked. "Did the Grax decide to attack the other cultures?"

"Our research from the other planet would suggest so," Thayne said, "but it appears to be something else. The signal did indeed originate from the Grax. However, it was intended as a distress call. They were asking for help but before the message could get out, it was corrupted … infected with a computer virus.

"Because the other cultures shared technology, essentially from one of the Orbs, their computer systems were impacted by it. The AI at various positions went crazy and caused the destruction we've seen. However, back on the Grax home world, something impacted that star and caused the massive destruction of all those planets.

"The stations survived, mostly intact, but the planets themselves became graveyards. No one survived. The last entries of the data we received talked about how they failed to save their people and that no one was coming to help. To the moment of their end, they believed their allies betrayed them when in reality, they were in just as dire a situation."

"Incredible," Desmond said, shaking his head. "But if the signal only went to those worlds, why are the Tol'An worried?"

"Because the signal went to many other worlds," Thayne said. "Gil is doing a tally right now, comparing it against the list of known dead planets we've explored in our culture but that won't be done for a time. However, we know that our home, as well as yours, received the broadcast. We simply didn't have the technology to impact … so it harmlessly connected and went silent."

"That's chilling." Vincent's eyes were wide. "I mean, to think if this would've happened last month, we might've experienced some of this damage too."

"Exactly," Thayne replied. "Our own world would've been torn apart. Now, the Tol'An has the wrong idea. More technology is not the

answer to face the virus we have seen … More importantly, some species created the virus and attacked the Grax. We do not know anything about them but there's a good chance they have survived all this time … a real threat in the shadows."
"Do we have details about the virus then?" Desmond asked.
"Yes, Gil and I were able to isolate it from the signal that went to the other world. We understand it and as a result, we can very likely put together a defense. That's what I was speaking to Engineer Webber about. I thought he might have some ideas and he did. If we put great minds toward this, we can overcome it. I recommend we be quick about it."
"Of course." Desmond rubbed his chin. "The Tol'An think they'll find a solution if they bring the Orbs together … Do you think there was one at the Grax site?"
"If so, a few things might've happened," Thayne explained. "One, it may have been destroyed. Two, their enemy may have taken it or three, the Tol'An found this area and took it themselves. We have no way of knowing at this point until we discover it. Somehow, they did have an Orb at one time though. That much is certain."
"We need to get back to Earth and report in," Desmond said. "Explain what we've found and decide what to do next. Maybe this information will help us negotiate with the Pahxin. What do you think, Thayne?"
"It is very likely. Coming to our people with a proposal which can help us defend ourselves will go a long way. I'm hopeful about the work we'll be able to do together, two likeminded cultures and all that."
Cassie leaned back and stared into space, considering the vision she received from the Orb. Knowing what happened, how the signal had become infected, made her all the sadder about the outcome. She felt for those souls who died not even knowing what killed them. If they had any chance of helping other people avoid such a fate, she looked forward to being involved.
"We'll have to reach out to them soon," Cassie said. "If we want them to be prepared, we'll have to work quickly and together to avoid it."
"There's another concern," Vincent said. "One we should be worried

about. Maybe the Tol'An aren't trying to stop this from happening. Maybe they want to learn how to recreate the virus. It would be a powerful weapon in the hands of zealots."

"Terrifying thought," Desmond replied. "They needed to be stopped before but this … this ups the needs by a lot. Good work everyone, and thank you for the briefing. You know the guys back on Earth will need a full presentation prepared so let's get it done before we get home. Send it my way and I'll have a once over to ensure we've covered everything."

The captain rose and offered a nod before leaving the room. Thayne and Gil turned to their computers and began typing away, chatting in their language. Cassie smiled at Vincent and shrugged her shoulders. "I guess there's no rest for the weary, huh?"

"I guess not." Vincent hesitated for a moment before getting up. "I … should get back to my post but … I'll talk to you before we get home, huh? Lunch or something?"

Cassie nodded. "Sure, I'd like that."

"Perfect … See you soon."

Cassie watched him go and sat quietly for a moment before returning to her terminal. It was nice to have a few regular interactions that didn't involve changing the world, defending the universe or solving intergalactic problems. A couple seconds with a fellow human being talking about something frivolous, beating around the bush about a date or even just being friendly felt right.

That's what we're struggling to protect when it comes right down to it and I'm glad to be part of the team.

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Alliance: Legacy War Book 3

A Chance for Peace

The crew of the Gnosis is set to make history again, this time for diplomacy. A message from the Pahxin has arrived, inviting humanity to a neutral space station where they might negotiate a treaty for cooperation and peace. It seems like a perfect opportunity to gain an ally against the malevolent Tol'An and the insidious Kalrawv Group.

But a dark force musters against them, one bent on disrupting this moment of peace with chaos. The joint forces of two worlds must come together to save not only themselves but also the delicate chance for lasting peace and cooperation. As the conflict intensifies, the crew of the Gnosis is confronted with a very real possibility of defeat.

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Prologue

Ezria Tolva carried the *Word*. It had been passed on to him from the founder of the Tol'An, Calatha Dervia, a devout Pahxin who understood that the universe could not be allowed to operate without guidance. Their own government lost sight of this fact, allowing the population to live in relative freedom.

The Tol'An rose to ensure the survival of the galaxy through enforcement but they required resources, people and the technology to hold others in check. Such a calling had struck many of their people but not all understood the divine directive. None had the vision to see how uncertain the future remained in the hands of those who allowed free will to reign.

Opposition remained strong. The Tol'An found themselves pushing against many obstacles, some of which seemed to have no plans to bend. Ezria took their resistance as a challenge, an opportunity to prove the righteousness of their cause. Nothing worth having came easy and he believed it wholeheartedly.

"Your Holiness." One of his people broke his reverie and he opened his eyes. He sat in his meditation chamber. Smooth metal walls were unadorned and there were no distractions other than the altar erected in the center of the room. A simple red cloth sat folded upon the surface but it represented the only color.

Ezria himself wore simple white robes. He kept his head shaved and his lean body fit. His was as perfect a Pahxin specimen as there could be and he worked hard to maintain himself. Pure food, no toxins and discipline kept him in peak condition. None of his subordinates would ever believe themselves to be better than their master.

He peered at the soldier through startling blue eyes, taking him in as if he were little more than a hallucination. The man shifted uncomfortably in his black uniform, his holsters emptied by the guards at the door. No one was allowed to carry weapons into the meditation chamber and he had been searched before being allowed to enter.

“Speak.” Ezria spoke above a whisper but the room seemed to amplify the softness of his voice.
“I come with news of our venture on Delinare. We brought back three artifacts but the one we were sent for did not seem to be present.” He shifted from foot to foot, his face contorted in anxiety. “Our scientist stated that it may have been destroyed in a landslide some time ago. We spent two days scanning for it to no avail.”
“I see.” Ezria sighed before approaching the man. “And you are certain you have done everything in your power to find the device? You have left no stone unturned?”
“Yes, your holiness. I am confident.”
“Very well.” Ezria lifted the cloth from the altar and pressed his face against it. When he pulled it away, the soldier remained before him. “Is there something else?”
“Yes, your holiness … I’m afraid … Well …”
“I do not have time for stammering.”
“Forgive me.” The man found some courage and spoke firmly. “We lost one of our starships. It was destroyed while trying to take off. Six men died aboard. We recovered two of the artifacts they were carrying but one was completely obliterated.”
“So we not only failed to procure the one item I sent you for,” Ezria began, “but you also lost one of the three which was meant to placate me. Along with equipment and resources. Do you have any other part of the failure you would like to impart? Or has this poor adventure been fully described?”
“That is all, your holiness.”
“Gizan,” Ezria called. “Enter.”
The soldier gasped, his eyes widening as a black cloaked figure entered the room. His long strides carried him to the center and he took a knee, bowing his head before Ezria. “Yes, Master?”
“Stand.” Ezria gestured to the soldier. “This man has failed in his duties. Will you please assist him in understanding the error of his ways?”
“Your holiness!” The soldier stepped forward. “Please! I can make amends. Allow me another chance, to bring another crew to the

planet. We will finish the scans—”
Ezria held up his hand and the man stopped speaking. “Finish? You made it clear you had done everything in your power to find the item before you left. Now you use the word *finish*. So you compound your incompetence with lying, is that it? Do I seem so naïve … so foolish that you can come to me with falsehood?”
“A slip of the tongue, your holiness …” The soldier seemed to be losing his conviction. Gizan turned his hooded head to Ezria who nodded once. A hiss of a blade leaving a leather scabbard echoed in the room and before the soldier could even stiffen, a red line appeared across his throat.
Blood spilled from the wound and the man clawed at it as he choked out the last few moments of his life. Collapsing to the ground, Ezria stepped back to avoid the pool of gore forming around the head. Executing one of their own did not please him but he could not allow his subordinates to lie without consequences.
“Thank you, Gizan. Make arrangements to get rid of … that.” Ezria refused to look at the body. “Return when you have finished.”
Gizan complied without a word, dragging the soldier out by one of his feet. Two men entered and mopped up the blood, cleaning the floor with a disinfectant before retreating. When the assassin returned, he stood quietly, waiting to be addressed. The man proved loyal without question, never giving Ezria any doubt as to his integrity.
Rumor suggested Gizan worked for Calatha when they first founded the Tol’An. Some suggested they were lovers but Ezria doubted it. When Calatha passed away, he turned over the mantel through a hand written will and it did not contain any words about the assassin other than to say he should be treated with the utmost respect.
“I have received word from our spies in the Pahxin government.” Ezria always spoke directly with Gizan. They exchanged no pleasantries when starting a conversation, preferring to get straight to the point. “It appears the filthy Earthlings have communicated with them. Doctor Thayne Rindala helped them.”
“The traitor,” Gizan said. It didn’t matter to the assassin that the Tol’An had kidnapped Thayne, only that he did not perform the duties

prescribed to him by Ezria. “He escaped when we attempted to take the Trindisha … If I’d been there, I would’ve silenced his tongue before he could reveal any more to those wretches.”
“Undoubtedly,” Ezria replied, “however, we have to contend with the consequences of his involvement with the Earthlings. Our people have invited them to the Golanthit Station for a parlay. It seems likely they will accept this and attempt to form a partnership with one another. I want you to take our forces and … interrupt this gathering.”
“Am I to kill them all then?” Gizan asked. There was no hint of concern over such an order. Merely a desire for information. If Ezria had asked the man to go to their home world and murder the Grand Councilor, he would have attempted it and possibly succeeded.
“No, I’m afraid we need to do something more dangerous. I want you to bring the dignitaries to me. They will make excellent examples when we do execute them but prior to their ends, I believe we can extract information.” Ezria smiled. “They should be more than open to speak when we put the questions to them in a direct manner.”
Gizan bowed his head. “As you say.”
“Select your men carefully, Gizan … Do not fail me.” Ezria threw the last bit in every time, though the man had always been able to deliver. They’d made it something of a game.
“I will not.” Gizan pressed his left fist against his chest. “Do you require anything else, master?”
“No, be quick about your preparations and let me know before you depart. I believe you will want to be in the area before they arrive and know you will face their military. Do not hold back on those fiends. Destroy whatever ships you must and kill anyone in your way. There should be no mercy for those who would deny our dominion.”
“Your will be done.” Gizan spun on his heel and departed, leaving Ezria to consider the upcoming mission in private. With his best assassin on the job, there was no doubt he would have the ambassadors in his grasp. What he would do with them needed some planning. Simply killing them might not get his point across but starting a war between two cultures …
The Pahxin would annihilate those filthy rats. I still cannot believe they

have two of the Trindishas. I would rather my own people reclaim them than to allow primitives access to such power. Before this month is done, I intend to see their world burn and their people suffer. Then we can return to attaining dominion over the galaxy … so we might save it from the threat.

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Chapter 1

Captain Desmond Bradford yawned, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. The clock beside his head buzzed moments before, letting him know they would be emerging from hyperspace in ninety minutes. This gave him plenty of time to get cleaned up, grab a meal and head to the bridge before they arrived home.

Reports on his computer kept him company through his normal routine though they weren't exciting. Systems showed green with minor issues here and there throughout the ship. Medical stated they had released all injured personnel back to their quarters. The biggest problem came from their damaged fighters, which required dry dock to complete repairs.

Agent Cassie Alexander provided him with an update on the research they were performing on the data they discovered during their last mission. She and the two Pahxin doctors had categorized it and it was organized in an easy to digest manner for their peers back on Earth. When they arrived, they'd be able to dive in and extract even more than the crew had during the short time they had had to study it.

Desmond wondered about the agent and worried about whether she was taking care of herself or not. Every time they went into hyperspace, she seemed to work through the trip and when they arrived, she was bright eyed and ready to go on the bridge or in the tech labs, depending on what they required.

Frankly, the woman seemed to be full of boundless energy. Still, it had benefited the ship greatly and he wasn't going to complain. She even went on the away mission to the space station and received positive feedback from the marines who went with her. *I guess the woman knows what she's doing.*

As captain of the vessel, he needed to worry about everyone on board though. If anyone pushed themselves too far, they might not be at their best when the chips were down. He decided to have a talk with her when they returned and ensure she was taking proper reset times at the very least.

The two doctors, on the other hand, he was confused by. Desmond didn't know what those men required to keep going. Food, sleep, all the human necessities may have been very different, despite the physiological similarities between them. Reports suggested they retired to their rooms once in a while but like Cassie, they *seemed* tireless in their pursuit of knowledge.

"Captain," Commander Vincent Bowman's voice crackled on the speaker. "We'll be emerging from hyperspace inside of thirty minutes."

"Thank you," Desmond replied. "I'll be right up."

He grabbed his tablet and left his quarters, heading for the elevator. People hurried through the hallways, passing him by with quick nods. Everyone wanted to get to their post before they had to emerge because it might be bumpy. Strapping in was advised if possible and, as if on queue, Lieutenant Salina Gold made the announcement.

"All hands, we will be emerging in thirty minutes. Please secure all cargo and belongings and report your department's status. Thank you."

Desmond disembarked the elevator onto the bridge and joined Vincent. "Anything to report?"

"No, sir," Vincent replied. "We're looking good all around. I checked the coordinates with Zach and we should be roughly three hours out from home when we arrive. Not too bad."

"Good. I'm eager to give them the data and see what they have to say. Gil and Thayne seem pretty convinced their government will be keen to talk when they see what we've learned. Allies will be nice. We've been in short supply of good will since we left home."

"I'm not sure what kind of welcome we thought we were going to get when they introduced themselves guns first," Vincent said. "Then again, how many times did humanity treat each other with similar disregard? Our history is full of times we were jerks. All the reparations in the world can't fix some of the stupid we got up to."

"Good point." Desmond turned to Salina. "Did you ever have a chance to look over the stuff we found?"

Salina nodded. "It was fascinating. They were such an advanced

culture but whatever happened to them started with their star. I found some scientific reports suggesting they were attacked. Whatever went after them wanted to cause havoc with them then altered their distress signal to hurt their allies as well."

"But they didn't have any idea why?" Desmond frowned. "Seems … strange."

"I'm speculating," Salina said, "but there's a chance they encountered a race of beings who simply did not want them there. Not to be too morbid, but they might've considered them an infestation and tried to exterminate them. As advanced as they were, they could travel to nearby solar systems. That might've represented a threat to whoever attacked them."

"Everything we gathered looked pretty peaceful to me," Desmond replied. "Though to be fair, I haven't read it all … nor would a culture necessarily talk about being warlike I guess. Though I'm probably stretching all things considered. Anyway, if your theory is right, then I wonder why they didn't come to Earth afterward and trash us."

Vincent jumped in, "Maybe they only worried about cultures with technology capable of disturbing them. They hit the core world then allowed the signal to branch out to other places that might be a problem. I'm guessing some of the worlds that died from their attack weren't even close to ready so they acted preemptively in those cases."

Desmond nodded. "If they didn't attack them, I'm guessing the other planets would've risen up and tried to take them on. That's exactly what they seemed to be trying to avoid." He hummed. "It's a travesty that they thought the only way to contend with their perceived problem was the obliteration of so many lives."

Salina cleared her throat.

"What is it?" Desmond asked.

"Just that when the intelligence of a species dramatically overshadows that of another, they tend to lose sight of the value of their lives. Take pests, for instance. We don't hesitate to call someone out to exterminate thousands of them. Even the ones which aren't necessarily harmful, like ants. An entire colony of them can be wiped out over inconvenience."

Vincent rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, Salina. You definitely have perspective.”
“It’s what you need to consider when we’re talking about this sort of thing.” Salina shrugged. “Consider this. If we are dealing with something with such a magnitude of difference from us, then we need to be incredibly cautious in how we go about addressing them. If we encounter them at all, they may not be prone to talk.”
“No one else has been,” Zach muttered.
“I think we’ll be ready,” Desmond said. “We have plenty of warning, lots of information and the resources of a planet working on it. Couple that with some potential allies and we’ve got a good shot at handling whatever comes our way. However, we have two immediate threats to worry about. The Kalrawv Group and the Tol’An.”
“The former bothers me.” Vincent scowled as he spoke. “The believers make sense but guys out for money at all costs? Even their lives? What the heck?”
“Oh, I spoke to Thayne more about them,” Salina said. “Apparently, when people join their organization, they’re all in. They commit their families and fortunes to the idea that they are going to make a lot of money. So when they go on a mission, they pretty much put everything into it. Losing costs them a great deal.”
“And because they’re a corporation,” Desmond continued, “I’m guessing they have some kind of insurance policy for their loved ones, am I right?”
Salina nodded. “Essentially, yes.”
“That’s how they can fight to the death and not seem to worry about it.” Desmond turned to Vincent. “If they know their families will be taken care of after they die in the line of duty, then I could see someone committing to the job so entirely. However, I’m guessing their bureaucracy requires a flight recorder … or whatever it takes to prove they didn’t just kill themselves.”
Vincent scoffed. “Typical. But why not accept our help on the planet’s surface?”
“Secrets,” Salina said. “Gil explained that they are highly protective of their technology and protocols. One of the reasons they are after him

is because of all he's seen. He never signed up with their doctrines and they didn't like that. Apparently, their captain pushed a contract on him several times but he refused to sign."

"Like he would've adhered to anything like that," Desmond added. "From the way Cassie described his state when they found him in that bar, he wasn't exactly a model citizen. Hell, he was excavating forbidden planets. They should've known better than to push a rogue toward the civil niceties of a job offer. Even if it had a pension."

Zach snorted. "We're emerging from hyperspace in two minutes."

Desmond braced himself, double checking that all departments reported green. He vaguely wondered why Cassie wasn't on the bridge but she probably rode out the rest of the trip with the two Pahxin doctors. They'd been talking a great deal and no doubt she was gathering intel for her own division, the Applied Intelligence Association.

Before their previous mission, she revealed something her superiors wanted to keep secret, a trump card to ensure their needs were met. Somehow, they granted her the authority to take command of the Gnosis should their needs arise. She immediately told Desmond but revealing the power didn't take it away.

Much as he wanted to trust her after the message, he found himself full of doubt. After all, she may have let him know as a means to convince him of her positive intentions, only to use it later and with the ability to tell him he was warned. Desmond wanted to tell his senior staff but he didn't want to cause unrest with the agent. Especially with Vincent. The man clearly felt something for the woman and he wasn't bothering to hide it. If she had been part of the crew properly, Desmond would've frowned on it but it didn't seem to be causing any problems, at least not yet. The two of them remained professional and appeared to have only shared a meal, little more.

The ship shook as Zach took them out of hyperspace, immediately bringing the view screen online. Desmond peered at the familiar star formations of home then turned to check their position on his own computer. Before he could bring up the data, Salina announced they had a message coming in.

That was fast. “Send it to my personal.” Desmond put in an earbud, speaking softly. “This is Captain Bradford.”

“Welcome home, Captain. I’m Commander Arling of the *Tribute*. We received your nav coordinates before you departed the previous system and we’ve come to meet you. Admiral Reach is on board and would like to take a shuttle to dock with you on our way back to Earth. We are thirty minutes from your current location.”

Desmond felt a sense of dread creep into his chest. If the admiral had come all the way out to meet them, he probably had bad news. Of course, pessimism may not be the best thing to indulge given the circumstances. They already found data to support the worst possible scenarios for any culture in the galaxy. He didn’t need to add unfounded worry to it.

“Of course,” Desmond said. “We’ll rendezvous shortly and welcome the admiral aboard.”

“Sending you coordinates now,” Arling said. “See you soon. Arling out.”

The *Tribute* was a small destroyer, one of the ships that survived the Tol’An attack and held them there until the Gnosis could arrive. Commander Arling was new enough to the position that Desmond didn’t know him. It made sense. Admiral Reach talked about rotating personnel through the fleet to give them experience.

The military needed people familiar space travel and combat. They wouldn’t get it from simulators and training manuals. Even with the Orb data, soldiers needed to sit in the seats and feel the action. Desmond wouldn’t have traded his missions for anything and felt confident he could meet most challenges or obstacles.

“What’s up?” Vincent asked. “Is the admiral really out here?”

Desmond nodded. He called out the coordinates to Zach. “Apparently, he can’t wait for us to get home. Even three hours. I hope that’s a good sign.”

Salina piped in, “They may have word from the Pahxin but I’m not finding any evidence of that on any channel or even the secured database. I have a high clearance as well.”

“I wonder if he’s planning on sending us right back out,” Vincent said.

“We’ll need a resupply at the very least … and those fighters have to be repaired.”
“I’m sure we’ll at least get that courtesy,” Desmond replied. “Put a meeting together in the briefing room. Put Cassie and Salina on it but leave the Pahxin doctors out for now. If we need them, we’ll know where they are.”
“The data’s compiled for high-level consumption,” Salina said. “We’re ready to present, even right now.”
Desmond considered his computer screen for a moment before responding. “That’s good but get down and talk to Cassie anyway. I want to ensure we’ve covered everything adequately. You guys know there’ll be a lot of questions and we need to be able to answer them. We’ve had plenty of time to read through what we found.”
Salina stood. “If he brought Doctor Harper, we’ll be in for a real grilling. I feel like we should send the data over to them right away.”
Desmond shook his head. “No, it’s not secure enough and considering all the civilian satellites we have to deal with, lord knows what they’ve drummed up to capture that kind of data. If some amateur got a hold of it, we could create a level of mass hysteria not seen since the Black Death.”
“That seems a little dramatic,” Vincent said. “Surely, they know we’ve been gallivanting around to other systems … visiting alien worlds. They can’t possibly think we’ve just been prospecting dead rocks.”
“They might not know the Gnosis even left the system,” Desmond replied. “Depending on how twitchy the military has been. Of course, one of our own people might’ve leaked it on shore leave but I kind of doubt it. Our missions may well be a total secret until we have great news to share.”
“You know how it goes,” Zach jumped in. “We play everything close to the chest until there’s something to celebrate. Then, providing it paints us in the best possible light, we tell the entire world. Everyone gets to find out how amazing we are and how our actions will benefit them. The only time it happens the other way is if a reporter gets the story first.”
Desmond smirked. “Eloquently stated, Zach and accurate. Alright,

folks. Get to work and inform the ship we have a VIP coming aboard. I don't mean to stand on ceremony but the admiral hasn't visited us before. Let's make a good impression."

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Cassie ran into Vincent on her way to the briefing room. They had roughly twenty minutes before the admiral would show up. His shuttle already docked in the hangar and his escort was on the way. Desmond met them down there so that left the others to prepare the room and ensure they had everything they needed.
"How's it going?" Vincent asked. "You ready for this?"
"I suppose," Cassie replied, looking at his face for a long moment. "You're nervous."
"The fact that the admiral flew all the way out here doesn't bode well." Vincent shrugged. "I expected to see him on Earth, you know? I have a bad feeling something tragic has happened … Like, maybe bad news from the Pahxin or even another attack. Though Salina told me she ran a scan of home and everything seems fine …"
"This job has taught me a valuable lesson," Cassie replied. "Don't assume facts. Dread leads to anxiety and no one has time for it. We end up doing our jobs badly at that point because we're too caught up worrying about what might be. Imagination might be our greatest gift but it can also be our undoing."
"I admire your calm." Vincent smiled, clearly trying to shake off his gloom. "Oh well, I'll try to take a page from your book in this case. How much are we going to be able to tell him?"
"Everything." Cassie tapped the panel by the briefing room door and they entered. A crewman was putting out pitchers of water and glasses along with some fruit. Her stomach growled at the thought and she realized she hadn't made it to lunch. *This is going to be exciting*. Taking a seat, she tapped into the main screen. "We've got the whole briefing prepared."
"I brought the resource allocation report." Vincent gestured to his tablet. "Along with the various briefings from the folks who conducted

the away missions. Did you see the biological readouts from those mutated people? I'm not an expert on anatomy but whatever happened to them really brought about some serious physical enhancements."

"Yeah, at the expense of self-preservation, compassion, mercy and diplomacy." Cassie tapped at her screen and brought her presentation up. "That place is forbidden for a reason. Maybe someday they'll rise above all that and evolve but it'll take quite a while. If they don't kill each other in the process."

"Or the planet dies completely," Salina said from the door. "Those storms will likely get worse and start hitting even the currently safe parts of the continents. I know they live underground, but their food sources will likely die out. I believe we saw the end of a species, not the beginning of a new one."

"Cheery, as always," Vincent replied. "Welcome to the party, Salina. Glad to have you."

"Thank you, Commander." Salina took a seat. "I hope that the admiral has brought good news. I'm choosing to believe he's here because he simply couldn't wait to tell us something positive."

"That's a stretch," Vincent said. "But I'll go with it. Better than the pessimism I was indulging."

Cassie chuckled. "Regardless of why he's here, we have a lot to go over. If he allows us to hit it all … this is pretty in the weeds. I tried to make the first part high-level but who knows if it's high enough? I can tell you this. The AIA is going to want the deep dive we did with Gil and Thayne. There's a lot of meat in those details."

"Indeed." Salina squinted at the screen, reading the first slide. "I'm still comfortable with it but the real people we need to sell this to are the Pahxin. They need to know what the Tol'An fears. It may well change the way they deal with those criminals. Perhaps they'll try to parlay and work together … get them to stand down and rejoin society properly."

"Unlikely," Cassie said. "I spoke with Thayne about how they were acting and I can tell you, they're far too fanatical to take orders … or give up for that matter."

The door opened and the three stood up. Desmond entered first followed by Admiral Reach and Doctor Harper. The escorts remained outside, turning to face away as the door slid shut. “Take your seats,” Reach said. “I don’t think we need to stand on ceremony with this type of briefing. We have a lot to discuss and I didn’t want to wait for you to get back to Earth.”

Desmond continued, “The Pahxin have replied to our initial communication and the admiral can tell us what was said.”

“Excellent.” Cassie exchanged glances with the others before going on. “I trust it was good news?”

“Somewhat,” Reach replied. “Please, let’s start with your mission before I get into the message we received. I’m sure you all had quite the adventure. Multiple solar systems, the neutral space station … Do tell.”

Desmond began the debriefing by explaining what happened on the space station when they went to pick up Doctor Gil Vaedra. This brought up the Kalrawv Group and what they represented, along with the details they’d picked up from their two Pahxin guests. The corporate mercenaries had plenty of data but they were technically the least of Earth’s worries.

Next, they spoke about the planet they visited and described the mutants well as the strange weather patterns. The loss of their marine and the near destruction of their shuttle came up as well as the procurement of the first breadcrumb of data. It led them to an adjacent system which, for all intents and purposes, was totally void of life.

Cassie and Salina took turns explaining the data they found and what it meant before handing the reins back to Desmond to talk about the conflict and the toll it took on their men and equipment. The admiral looked grave during that part, frowning throughout the description of how far the Kalrawv Group was willing to go.

“You guys saw quite a lot of action out there,” Reach said. “One thing Doctor Harper’s folks have been working on is long range communications. The ability to talk to you when you’re so far from home. Our research suggests that it was possible, a long time ago but

how they did it … We're still stuck."
Harper stepped in, "Yes, we've found plenty of references and some obvious cases where such technology was used but applying it to our current technology … Let's just say we're having to do some rethinking of how we broadcast signals.
"As you know, with few exceptions, we've simply improved existing concepts with what we've learned. We may have gone as far as we can with communications."
Reach nodded in agreement. "When we received word from the Pahxin, they commented about how surprising our method was. And we thought it was pretty genius the fact we got it there so quickly. The FTL concepts we applied, with Doctor Rindala's help, made us think we were on the right track.
"Anyway, that's neither here nor there. We are working on a way to support you better in the field and that includes fast tracking another ship. It's almost done. They're on to the test phase of the various systems. Hyperspace will come last, but we'll hopefully have it fully operational inside of a month."
"That's quite a while," Desmond said. "And I doubt we have the luxury of waiting."
"You don't." Reach sighed. "In fact, we're going to be sending you back out sooner than you think … and I'll be coming with you. I believe it's time I tell you about our chat with the Pahxin. It may soon finally be time to announce to the world everything you've accomplished and seen but we're not quite there yet."

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Desmond stiffened at the idea of taking the admiral out of the system. As a flag officer, and one of the highest value individuals in the current space program, he seemed like someone they could not afford to risk. While they had certainly proven the hyperspace drive worked safely, there were other risks involved in long distance travel.
High command either trusted the technology more than Desmond would imagine or they were simply that desperate to ensure their next

mission had high-level representation. Whatever he had to tell them must've been intense because he paused again and had already built a considerable amount of drama around the announcement.
"The Pahxin communication came a day ago," Reach said. "They were intrigued by our actions so far and want to speak. We have coordinates to a mostly neutral location, a space station where we can talk. The species that runs it is like a galactic version of Switzerland and will provide us accommodations in a non-biased environment."
"So we're doing an ambassadorial run?" Vincent asked.
Reach turned to him, "Do you have a problem with that, Commander?"
Vincent shook his head. "Not at all, sir. I'm just surprised they were ready to meet so soon."
"Our communications were too slow," Harper said. "That's why we really started to analyze our efforts. If we'd mastered real time or, at least close to real time, conversation then clearly we would've negotiated from afar. As it stands, they recommended the coordinates and we agreed to meet them there at what amounts to the beginning of next week."
Desmond hummed. "So we have time to resupply, repair our ships and take some downtime before heading back out. What're the chances of hostility?"
"Small," Reach replied. "Though I don't necessarily trust your Pahxin passengers just now … not enough to have them in this talk at least. Especially the new one you picked up. From what I understand, he operates outside their laws?"
"He's an adventurer," Desmond explained, "but I don't think he's a bad person. Still, they might want words with him. He visited one of their 'forbidden' planets and I understand why it has such a designation. The place was outright hostile, in every way possible. The Kalrawv Group figured it out pretty fast."
"We won't turn him over or anything," Reach said. "But I want to make sure we get off on the right foot first. They can come along to the meeting. In fact, Thayne has been specifically invited but we'll keep this other guy in reserve. If there is any hostility, we're going to

want to leave in a hurry … Though if the Pahxin start it, I'm not sure what we're going to do."
"Because they can just follow us," Vincent added. "And then Earth would be in trouble."
"Let's keep it very real here." Reach leaned forward, hands clasped on the table. "If the Pahxin wanted to, they could come to our planet and kill every form of life we know. They could take the two Orbs tomorrow and there's not a damn thing we could do to stop them. The Tol'An, while dangerous, do not command their resources."
"They can raid," Desmond said, "but not commit to a prolonged assault. In other words, this bid for peace *has* to work or we're in a lot of trouble."
"The best-case scenario is a partnership." Reach paused, letting out a deep breath before continuing. "But if they simply don't want anything to do with us, that's better than the worst that can happen. How long before the Gnosis is ready to leave again?"
"A couple of days depending on the priority of our resources," Desmond replied. "I also need some crew replacements. Another marine lieutenant would be nice. And we've got a couple commendations to hand out as well. All this can be done at the same time as cleaning things up and getting our systems back online."
"Very well." Reach nodded. "I'm going to get out of your hair and back to the Tribute. We'll reconvene on Earth. Science teams will stick to their work with the data you've recovered and engineering will prep the ship for departure. I'd like to be ready for the jump no later than Sunday. Is that reasonable?"
"Absolutely," Desmond said. "We'll aim for a little sooner."
"Fantastic." Reach stood up and everyone followed suit. "Doctor Harper, would you like to remain on board and get a jump start on studying the information?"
Harper nodded. "Absolutely. I'd like to get some time with the Pahxin doctors as well."
"It's all yours." Reach turned to Desmond. "I'll show myself out, and thank you for this impromptu meeting. I'm confident in this meeting and your crew. Great work so far, Captain. To you and yours. See you

all soon.”

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Chapter 2

Gizan's plan required some preparation and resources but the time crunch meant improvising. He could not pull their forces from the various assignments throughout the galaxy but he had an alternative. One of their largest ships was available and he needed it to carry fighters. The Pahxin were always quick to launch one-man vessels. Besides that, he needed distractions, destroyers or scouts at the very least. Furthermore, he could not exhaust the defenses of the Tol'An base if the enemy happened to find them. No, he needed something unexpected that would work as a means to deal with the Pahxin and their new human pets.

This meant using his swift assault vessel to acquire the extra assistance. Gizan had no lack of manpower but places to put them … That was the challenge. He ordered the battleship and its destroyer escort to an adjacent system of the Gaelirans where he'd rendezvous with them later.

A transport vessel was loaded up with enough men to crew an additional two vessels. They were ordered to give Gizan six hours before following him to his destination: a small shipyard on the edge of Pahxin space. They'd picked the location for its proximity to a resource rich asteroid field.

It was an isolated system, well away from any civilized space. Gizan's plan involved jamming their communications and commandeering two more ships. They would have to attack the station, disable the defensive ships then claim their prizes and get out. Reinforcements would be on their way as soon as contact was confirmed as lost. This meant they would have less than a full day to pull off the operation and be on their way. It had the added benefit of being a rehearsal for their true purpose, a chance to try some strategies before they needed to implement them. He hand-picked ten of his finest fighters to board his assault craft to make the situation happen. Precise calculations would put them at the facility within ten hours. The transport ship would arrive a few hours later and they needed to

be prepared to receive them. A misstep or any failure would lead to many deaths. Gizan was willing to take the risk, mostly because he was convinced the Pahxin resistance would be minimal.

The station defenses were flawed for a variety of reasons. One, the Pahxin seemed to use the post as a punishment for those who did not follow the rules. They didn't believe anyone would bother attacking it or they would have invested more in keeping it safe. Their Council of Defense didn't consider the Tol'An a true threat nor had they declared war on the group.

Perhaps when we take their ships and abduct their ambassador, they will begin to take us seriously. The thought made Gizan smile. He wanted the Pahxin government to show the proper fear and respect for his master. Direct action would be the only way to bring such things about. *The more we kill, the more they must take notice.*

The worth of the Tol'An would certainly be measured again when they concluded their mission at the Gaeliran space station. But first, they must finish their raid.

They emerged from hyperspace and took stock of the situation. Two defensive ships, one a scout and the other a destroyer, patrolled some distance from the station. Six other vessels in various states of repair and construction, were docked about the facility. A quick scan indicated they were looking at just over one hundred workers and security.

Gizan gave the order for them to begin jamming the station's communications. "Now that they are muted, charge the facility. Work on the door the moment we are in range. This will need to be quick." He gestured to three of the men. "Do not forget to sound off on the timer for bombs."

"By your will," they said in unison, nodding their heads.

"They are hailing us, my lord." The pilot announced the message without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Let them quiver in our silence. This is the most excitement these fools have had in months. Their last moments of life shall be invigorating as never before." He turned to the others. "Remember to show no mercy. You will kill anything you encounter along the way. We are not to

take any prisoners either."

The message was unnecessary. This group of soldiers had worked with Gizan several times in the past and they understood his methods. Only when the grand master of the Tol'An gave orders to capture did Gizan allow a target to live. Efficiency meant cleaning every mess and that included anyone who might relate exactly what happened.

They will have to piece this story together from the destruction we leave behind and the appearance of their vessels at a different location. I may not be able to kill all the Gaelirans but they will be hard pressed to convey much about what we did.

Jamming only the station allowed them a little time before the two ships decided to investigate. First, they'd blame some sort of malfunction. Then, some kind of interference would be considered. Finally, they would head back to see what happened. If the Tol'An didn't take the control center before that time, the mission would be jeopardized.

"The doors are unlocked," the computer expert in the back announced. "I've unlocked several others as well so it should confuse them as to which we plan to enter through."

"Wise decision." Gizan appreciated the initiative, the fact that the man did what was right without being told. None of them carried names in his mind. They were simply titled after the tasks they were expected to perform. Getting personal didn't help anyone. Pretending they had value as beings beyond the tasks they were assigned served no purpose.

"How long to dock?" Gizan asked.

"Two minutes," the pilot replied. "Once we draw close, our magnetics will secure us but it will be bumpy. I recommend everyone strap in until we're secured."

"We don't have the luxury of that," Gizan said. "Hang on tight, ready your weapons and when the door opens, be prepared to shoot. I trust you've got an override on the airlock?"

"Yes, sir. We'll open both simultaneously."

Such a thing broke the protocol of every station in the galaxy save some of the seedy pirate ones. Gizan had seen it come in handy

several times. They ejected entire groups through such tactics. Breaking the security to do such a thing proved particularly difficult but the Tol'An went out of their way to devise ways around such defenses.

The station was close enough to make out the individual windows but as they drew near, the ship spun to the side. The pilot allowed the momentum of the craft to carry them closer to their chosen door and when he hit the thrusters, they were jostled by a sudden tremble. They collided with their target hard enough to cause the entire ship to shake wildly.

Something hissed and the pilot nodded. "We're lined up with the door and the magnetics have sealed! You are good to advance!"

The men held their weapons at the ready and Gizan tapped the button to open both doors. His people fired the second they had clear shots and one of them took a blow to the face from a returned shot. Screams erupted outside, men and women crying out in shock at the violence they were subjected to.

"Advance!" Gizan growled. "Move out into the hall or we will be pinned in!"

His people charged out, firing wildly. Gizan followed, taking his time for more precision shots. He counted six live targets and they were already falling back. Bodies littered the ground, the first responders who attempted to repel them. Others would be coming, the ones assigned to the doors the Tol'An didn't go through.

We must finish these quickly. The defenders were in full-on panic and their shooting suffered. They continued to miss while his own people tore them apart. The last two dropped to their knees and raised their hands, shouting out their surrender. Gizan waited to see how his people would react.

His troops surrounded them, drew their blades and cut them down. Blood sprayed on the deck as the corpses dropped to their sides, twitching out the final moments of their lives. *Good, they have taken my directive to heart.*

"Break up," Gizan said. "We have much to destroy and plenty of these fiends to kill. Keep your com channels open. Our coordination is key

to success. Go. Be the blades of the Tol'An!"

They parted with Gizan leading four toward the control center. Once they were there, they would have unfettered access to the security systems. The slack nature of their opponents meant they were slow to initiate any sort of realistic defense. An alarm blared overhead but it didn't accompany the expected resistance.

Summoning the elevator, Gizan turned to look back down the hall toward their ship. Their pilot would defend the vessel at all costs, waiting for their return. Chances were good no one would bother to attack it. Those in the station needed to focus on the invading force rampaging through the various departments.

The doors opened and an unarmed man in a fancy suit stared at them with wide eyes. Gizan lashed up, jabbing his throat with the tips of his fingers. The victim grabbed at his neck just a moment before one of the other soldiers shot him in the head. They tossed the body into the hallway before boarding and heading up.

Gizan's com crackled in his ear and one of his men reported in. "We've encountered the enemy on our way to the engineering section. Six in total. We are engaging."

"Let me know when you have arrived at the reactor." Gizan had no doubt his people would win the engagement. He didn't feel a need to remind them not to fail. Their zeal would carry them through and as he listened to screams in his earbud, he couldn't help but smile at the carnage wrought by his crew.

When the elevator slowed, Gizan and his men leaned into the walls. The doors opened and someone outside opened fire. The blasts hit the empty wall and Gizan returned fire, just aiming his weapon outside. Someone cried out and they were driven back, giving the invaders a chance to charge into the open space.

Terminals lined the walls and a step up near the center created a work space for five people. All around the middle dais, computer equipment created a barrier which inadvertently protected the defenders. The man who tried to take them out by firing into the elevator stood alone but dashed back to the safety of the central consoles.

A wild firefight broke out, forcing Gizan's people to take cover. One of

them took a blow to the head and another was shot in the arm. They gave back twice what they received. Cries of agony echoed off the ceiling as the invading forces fired into the confined space. With nowhere to go and their position indefensible, the Pahxin forces were quickly defeated.

Gizan stepped out and motioned for his people to ensure their targets were dead. He approached the console, unmoved by the sound of blades sliding across flesh. Surely, their victims had died in the fight but he didn't want to take any chances. They might be up there for over half an hour and if so, that would be plenty of time for someone to recover and take a shot.

Monitors lined the space in front of him, twelve in all and Gizan filled them with security footage from around the station. He watched as his men made steady work of the defenders in the engineering section. They were fighting in a long corridor, taking cover in small inlets used for maintenance.

Those they were fighting made bold but foolish moves, dashing out when they should've remained back. Only two remained after a few moments and they refused to show themselves, knowing they would be killed.

Gizan tapped into the coms of his people. "You have two targets left and they are hiding at the end of your corridor. Their cover is sound so it would not be advisable to charge them. You will find the body of one of their soldiers nearby. I recommend you overload their weapon and use that to flush your targets out."

"Yes, sir!" One of them cried out, rushing forward to find the body. Several shots hit the ground around him but he continued on, unfazed by the attacks. He reached his destination and began fiddling with the firearm, keeping his head down. A moment later, he hurled it toward the defenders and dashed back to his cover.

Screams broke out and one of them dove to safety just as the weapon burst. The core didn't have enough charge left to kill the man but it did seem to daze him. Gizan's people charged and fired at the stunned individual, putting him down. One of them was rewarded with a shot to the side, a nonfatal blow that dropped them to the ground.

The others tore into the final defender, hitting him more than twenty times before they stopped.

Unnecessary, Gizan thought. *At least they succeeded*. "Prepare your charges but do not start them until I say."

"Dorin Station," a voice pumped through the overhead speakers. "This is Tella. Can you guys read me? What's going on? Why's the alarm going off? There's something wrong with coms too. I can't get a message out of the system. Did we have a reactor leak?"

One of the defending vessels. Gizan smirked as he prepared the weapons. The ships they needed to take were docked for various upgrades and repairs. Those flying around out there were in the way and needed to be dealt with. If they truly thought they were still dealing with their allies, then taking them out would not be overly difficult.

Gizan typed a message to them, explaining that their outgoing communications were experiencing a problem. Interference came from the reactor leak the commander feared. He requested they approach to send some help to replace some casualties they were experiencing. It only took a moment for them to comply.

Good thing they didn't notice our entrance into the system. My assault craft is truly a marvel.

The key to successfully dealing with the military craft involved holding off until the right moment to bring the weapons online and fire. As Gizan's targets drew closer, he noticed a com signal coming from the construction crews. They were asking what happened, looking for some assurance that they were safe.

Gizan locked down the doors, trapping the workers where they were. The docking clamps were also secured and could not be disengaged from the other side. Someone from the crews might be clever enough to break through and free themselves but by the time they thought to try, it would be too late.

He didn't answer their calls, turning his attention to the approaching ships that were an actual threat. The weapon's console indicated they were at extreme range. *Come a little closer. I want this to wrap up quickly*. Neither vessel had raised their shields. The trust remained

even in the unusual circumstances.
“The station is secure.” The report came through Gizan’s earpiece and he smiled. “Detonators are set and charges are ready.”
Gizan didn’t reply but he brought the weapons online and fired into the destroyer. Massive cannons unleashed fury upon the larger of the two ships, tearing through the unshielded hull. Secondary explosions dotted the side and debris burst out in all directions. As it began to drift, the reactor went up and the whole craft was consumed in a golden bubble of flames.
A power surge in the scout indicated they were trying to bring their defenses online but they didn’t have time. The station’s weapons were vastly more powerful and far easier to redirect. Gizan fired again, annihilating the smaller ship with the first two shots. The rest were overkill, passing harmlessly through the chunks of molten hull.
The station is ours, Gizan thought. *Time to make the best of it … and rid ourselves of those unnecessary construction crews*. He turned to his people. “Jettison the unfinished and damaged ships. When they are far enough away from the station, destroy them. Provide medical attention for our wounded and begin prepping what we can of our spoils.
“When our people arrive, I expect to have them acclimate and depart as soon as possible. We should be able to occupy two scouts and two destroyers. The next part of our mission will not be as simple, I assure you.”
Gizan headed out to supervise the process. Killing everyone aboard wasn’t the hard part. Getting people into place to commandeer their prizes, that would take some considerable administrative work. Gizan’s least favorite part of any operation.

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The Gnosis returned home and immediate went about swapping out vehicles and getting their people cycled through to some ground time. Engineers came aboard and worked with Chief Engineer Nathaniel Webber to collaborate and ensure all ship systems were working

properly.
They entered into discussions about the advancements coming their way and how best to implement them seamlessly without significant downtime. The second Orb helped them solidify a number of theories and they were in the simulation phase. Some of these advancements would end up in the new ship they were completing.
Others required more time to ensure they were safe.
Desmond and Vincent went through the records of volunteers who wanted to join the Gnosis. They had some people to replace, a couple who were transferring off and of course, those lost in the recent mission. Well over three dozen candidates applied and each of them wrote an enthusiastic letter to get on board.
“They’re hungry for it,” Vincent said. “Maybe they believe going into space will enhance their career.”
Desmond shrugged. “I’m more inclined to believe they’re all keenly aware that going into space with us is like putting your name in the history books. Others are going to come after us and very likely do more but no one can say they were the first to go into hyperspace and leave our solar system … or encounter an alien race.”
“What’s that tell you about these candidates?”
Desmond smirked. “That someone’s talking who shouldn’t. What we’ve been doing is secret. The fact we have so many means the rumor mill gave them hope.”
One of the most important roles to fill was another Lieutenant for the marines. Desmond set up an appointment with Captain Darren Gabriel to sit down with the three men who might take the job. They’d be meeting with them at Gamma Alpha. Each of the men served there for over two years and their letters suggested they were ready for a change of pace.
They’ll definitely get it on these cruises, Desmond thought. *I can’t imagine finding more action on Earth right now*.
Military high command had yet to announce to the people of Earth what they were up to. As far as anyone was concerned, the Gnosis continued to fly training missions. There were conspiracies floating around, all generated from the usual suspects. The AIA was quelling

the most probable of them but some would be proven true when a press conference was finally held.

Desmond wondered why they were waiting so long. Did they truly believe the planet would be swept up into a panic? Someone must've done some studies or polling to support the silent treatment but it seemed like getting the support of civilians would help a great deal. Especially for the men and women of the Gnosis who wanted to visit family.

Keeping quiet about their activities had to be difficult.

Speaking of civilians, one of the contractor companies would be meeting with Desmond on Earth. They were responsible for building some of the advanced systems the Gnosis used and they operated on Gamma Alpha under strict confidence. Reach's notification stated they wanted to have a chat with the man in charge of the ship.

Desmond didn't know why considering how little he could tell the person. His least favorite parts of the job involved making nice with vendors and going to lavish parties. Fortunately, they'd been too busy for that type of thing lately but of course, as soon as time permitted, he was thrown back into the fray.

I'd rather be facing down a Kalrawv ship again than try to beat around the bush with this civilian.

Desmond made his way to Gamma Alpha the next day and stowed his gear in his quarters before heading out to meet his full docket. Many of his meetings involved security planning for the admiral while he was aboard the ship. They were concerned about his safety though no one could specifically state why.

After six meetings, someone finally said they were worried about spies aboard the Gnosis who might try to disrupt the alien talks. Desmond found the notion absurd. No one had attempted to sabotage the ship and they had plenty of opportunities. Nevertheless, the accusation put a huge strain on psychological operations, who had to run profiles on every crew member.

Twenty men and women boarded the Gnosis so they could get the evaluations done before they left in only a few days so they ended up working some pretty crazy hours. Of course, psi-ops didn't have a

whole lot to do during this potential conflict, considering they couldn't exactly study their opponents so Desmond didn't feel too bad.
The next morning, he and Captain Gabriel met in their conference room to interview the different lieutenants. Gabriel looked particularly severe with his dress uniform and buzzed haircut. His square jaw made him look like a character out of some kind of nineteen-fifties atomic science fiction movie and he carried himself with ramrod perfect posture.
"Morning, Darren," Desmond said. "How'd you find the trip?"
"Jeb's a good pilot," Darren replied with a scowl, "but the bastard doesn't need to fly so fast. We could've gotten down here five minutes later. I had half a mind to tell him so."
Desmond chuckled. "He saved a lot of lives with that crazy flying last mission."
"Yeah, when something's about to blow up, I'd take him any day but next time, I'm grabbing someone who isn't in such a damn hurry."
Their first interview arrived, a Lieutenant Yancy Lipkin. His record looked impeccable but in the first few minutes of their conversation, it became clear that he was too green for their needs. He'd graduated from the academy six months earlier and simply didn't have the field experience they needed to lead the team.
Desmond was thinking about an officer having to work with a man like Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow. Heading down to alien worlds was stressful enough without the men lacking trust in their leaders.
When Yancy left, Darren completely agreed with Desmond's assessment. The young man needed time to develop.
Lieutenant Brent Fielding came in next, a twenty-seven-year-old soldier with a slightly less impressive academic record than Yancy but he came hot off a campaign taking on terrorists in Asia. He came with commendations from his superiors and positive testimonies from the men who were under his command as well.
"Welcome, Lieutenant," Darren said. "Why do you want to join the Gnosis?"
"Sir," Brent began, "I want to see the stars but more importantly, I'm the best person for the job."

Desmond's brows lifted. "Extrapolate on that. There are some pretty talented young people coming in here today. What makes you believe you're better?"
"I saw Yancy leave," Brent replied. "He's a fantastic bureaucrat. Understands every form we've ever made someone fill out. If you were having trouble with your quartermaster, I'd say you'd be crazy not to bring him on board. But the only trigger time he has involves a shooting range. He can shoot straight in simulations but he's never really been shot at."
"You think that's the key to success in our operations?" Darren asked. "The ability to shoot straight?"
"Keeping a cool head under fire is one of the most important things a soldier can do," Brent answered. "That and ensuring your men have a solid leader who will be right there with them in the thick of things. No one wants to follow a guy who's hesitant or doesn't know what to do next. I shook off combat jitters a long time ago."
"I've got a scenario," Darren said. "You're in a foreign facility far from any support. It's just you and four men. There are enemies on either side and the only way to take them out is to hit them in the head. Coms are down and you have to get to an LZ in thirty minutes or you'll be left behind.
"Add to this scenario that you still haven't finished your objective which is inside the facility somewhere. What do you do?"
"Get inside," Brent replied. "Conserve ammo with superior marksmanship, secure the cargo then head back outside using jump jets. We might not be able to kill our targets easily but I doubt they're going to enjoy having half a ton of armor plunging down on them as we hop through their ranks."
"Sounds like someone I know," Desmond muttered. "What's your tech experience? You good with computers?"
"I have an A rating with computer systems, analysis and access."
"Means you can hack them, right?" Darren asked.
"Yes, sir." Brent nodded once. "Essentially."
"Your record's pretty solid." Desmond looked it over again. "Let's get into some more semantic questions."

They quizzed the young man for another half hour, mostly about protocol and various regulations. Desmond wasn't surprised that he nailed every question though true to his words, he wasn't as knowledgeable about the red tape as Yancy. Still, he seemed like a solid choice and the kind of man who would be able to win the loyalty of the other soldiers.

When he left, Darren cleared his throat. "I think he'll be the one. Did you notice he didn't immediately go to the academy? He served as a sergeant before he applied for school. He'd already done a tour before he got a commission."

"Is that why he seems worldly?"

Darren nodded. "Definitely. I admit, I did the same. I fought in the eastern campaign of Russia before I went to school. It helped in more ways than you can imagine."

"I understand. I was a fighter pilot before I took the bridge of the Gnosis." Desmond hummed. "We need to talk to the third candidate and see how he compares. And here I was worried we would have to go back to the pool to find someone."

"Marine officers tend to be pretty solid," Darren said. "Not to say that other branches aren't that way but promotions are a lot harder with us."

Lieutenant Davy Prosser entered next, offering a crisp salute. Desmond peered at his record again and noted that he had a few demerits. One of them for public fighting and the other for intoxication. Both incidents were over eight months earlier but they didn't paint a positive picture, certainly not for a man about to go into space.

"I'm looking at your troubles here," Desmond said. "Would you care to explain?"

"A couple moments of stupidity, sir," Davy replied, "they won't be happening again."

"I'm sure you can see how we'd be concerned about this though."

Davy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"How much trigger time have you had?" Darren asked. "When was your last op?"

"A year ago," Davy said. "It was a training mission into Alaska."

“Any real combat?” Darren looked at his record again. “Off the books, I mean. I don’t see anything official.”
Davy shook his head. “No, sir. I’m ready though. I’ve been preparing for a real fight for five years now.”
“Why do you want to go into space?” Desmond asked. “What’s your motivation?”
“I think it’s the future of humanity,” Davy said. “I’d like to be part of it.”
“You have a certification in astro navigation.” Darren seemed impressed. “Why’d you go for that?”
“You never know when you might be stranded somewhere and need to get home.”
“Fair point.” Darren set the record aside and hit him with the same questions as the others. Davy seemed uninspired, as if he didn’t want it as badly as the other two men. He might’ve been able to do the job but with the demerits, Desmond wasn’t convinced. Besides, without the fire in his belly, he wouldn’t be able to lead the men they already had.
Not effectively at least.
“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Darren said. “You’ll be informed of our decision in the morning. Dismissed.”
Davy saluted. “Thank you, sir!” He spun on his heel and marched out.
“Seems like a clear winner to me,” Desmond said. “We’re going with Lieutenant Fielding, right?”
“I’d like to,” Darren replied. “Lieutenant Prosser’s father is on the military council, so we’ll have to let the boy down easily … Probably tell the old man before we do. But otherwise, yeah, I think we’ve got the right man waiting. Want me to draft up the orders?”
Desmond nodded. “I’ll be happy to sign them. I’m glad we’re good to go.” He glanced at his computer and sighed. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to take back some of my time to grab some food before the next meeting.”
“Don’t let me stop you, sir.” Darren shook his hand and they parted ways. One of their bigger concerns was taken care of and now they only had to finish shoring up the security concerns. Once that was

over, the Gnosis would be ready to leave and Desmond could finally get a little rest.

I barely remember what relaxing even is. Just another full day and I'll find out.

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Chapter 3

Cassie's computer chimed as a new meeting popped up and she groaned at the sender. Her superior, Beaumont Dulain, acted as the director of the AIA. Typically, she would've worked through a handler, someone far beneath a man of Dulain's stature but this situation warranted special attention.

Contacting aliens, traveling to foreign worlds and engaging in a new type of intrigue turned out to be events the AIA wanted direct involvement with. Cassie thought they'd relieve her once they finished their first mission. She possessed plenty of tech experience but hadn't been in the field nearly as much as others.

It's probably why they picked me. I can relate to the others easier and they don't smell an old spy who's there to steal their secrets. Indeed, her wide-eyed enthusiasm for her job must not have seemed like an act and in all honesty, it wasn't. However, considering the paranoia level of some people, she fully expected to be confronted sooner or later.

This time, Dulain wanted to meet her in a conference room instead of the hangar so the conversation must've been more 'official' than the last chat. *What's he plan on putting on me now? The ability to start a war on Earth's behalf?* He gave her a code during their previous talk which allowed her to take operational command of the Gnosis.

They wanted to ensure opportunities were taken. Cassie couldn't imagine an instance when she would take command or even tell Captain Bradford what to do. The man might've seemed like an easy going sort but there was something about him that suggested he would not take kindly to being usurped.

She told Desmond about the code, as Dulain suggested, and while he seemed good with the conversation, he wasn't entirely comfortable with it. Tipping her hand to him might've been a bad idea and maybe the captain complained. He might've raised enough of a stink to have her pulled from the operation. It would probably be fitting all things considered.

But she didn't want to leave. Not yet at least.

Cassie arrived a few minutes early and flopped down in one of the seats. She couldn't wait for the day to end so she could get some sleep and do something besides work on computers or talk about alien technology. Much as she loved both, the hours weighed on her and, like the others, she needed a decompression period.

Dulain showed up alone, closing the door behind him. The fact he lacked an entourage bothered her but she couldn't place why. He wore a fancy, retro suit with lapels and a black shirt underneath with gold trim along the seams. By contrast, she wore her white uniform that made her look like an especially stuffy lab technician.

The AIA has multiple looks depending on the situation. The uniform allows us to work closely with the military because they're comforted by that sort of thing. Others wear the fancy business outfits to give them some respectability but the real field types throw on whatever helps them blend in. Cassie remembered one of her classmates giving the assessment. Back then, she thought they were just being dramatic and that clothing didn't nearly matter so much. After working in the AIA for a year, she realized how important appearance could be. Controlling a person's perception allowed one to exert power over them. Her innocent behavior on the Gnosis made the crew trust her, granted them security with her presence.

Had she been clever enough to be pretending, it would've been her *choice* to bring about that outcome.

"Senior Agent Alexander," Dulain said, "thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I've got some important news about your next mission."

"Yes, sir." Cassie somehow bit back a snippy comment. The director made her uncomfortable and her natural reaction involved rudeness.

"We know the Gnosis will be transporting Admiral Reach to meet with the Pahxin. He tried to keep us out of the loop by meeting you in space but we've had someone working as an aide for a while."

"Why would he want to keep the AIA out of this?"

"Reach is one of those old soldiers who thinks spies are always on the lookout for the next war," Dulain explained. "He believes that it's in our best interest to start trouble with the Pahxin so we can make

ourselves useful. What he fails to realize is the best espionage is never reported, no one knows it happened and it prevents countless catastrophes in the process."

A line straight from one of the text books. Cassie nodded her response. "I understand."

"I'm going to give you her identity and if she requires support, she will be contacting you directly. She's a top priority asset and one of our best field operatives. There's a good chance you won't even interact but if you have to, if something goes down, then be prepared. Reach can be a stubborn bastard but we can't afford to lose him right now."

"Why is she being sent?" Cassie asked. "Is she a … a bodyguard?"

"No," Dulain replied. "She's been giving us information from the admiral and now, this is our opportunity to gather some intelligence on the military capabilities of the Pahxin. Through her observations, we can determine just how outmatched we are and what we should plan to do about it."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Cassie asked. "If they find out …"

"How would they?" Dulain shrugged. "As far as anyone but you knows, she's simply an aide. When she gets back and talks to us, she'll prove to be an especially observant one. Anyway, her name is Christina Dawson."

"This feels like unnecessary internal intrigue," Cassie said. "Can't we sit down and have a conversation? Tell him what's going on? He seems like a reasonable man. I've been to several meetings with him."

"Each time you've seen him, he's been in control. You're in his environment. Believe me, I've been in rooms where he is *not* the dominant force and you see a different individual emerge. We have to be cautious and we can't exert our will directly on him. Even if it saves his life. Now, I won't placate him if it means compromising the security of the Earth … but we're not there yet."

God, I hope we never get *there*. Cassie once again kept her thought to herself. "Thank you for the head's up. Is there something else we need to discuss?"

"I'd like to talk about the vision you had from the Orb. We have a

theory about it."
"It happened while we were studying the second one. In fact, it showed me a glimpse of what likely happened to the planets we researched on this last time out."
"There are a couple of possibilities we've discerned," Dulain explained, "one, you may have found a new method of gathering historical data from the device. Or two, you've discovered the first steps we need to take toward updating our communications. Some are theorizing that the Orb may have a real time solution for chatting across great distances."
"I've heard some talk about that," Cassie said. "Doctor Harper's been working on it from what I understand. They talked about having to start over, that we've exhausted the extent of our current technology we built upon. I wouldn't be surprised. There comes a time when everything reaches a limit and needs to be overcome."
Dulain nodded, smiling at her comment. "Have you fully detailed your experience? I mean, everything. The sensation, the length of time, what you were doing exactly … all of it?"
"Yes, I turned it over to the scientists." Cassie furrowed her brow, suddenly feeling unnerved. "Why?"
"I read a report which suggested some of the techs have tried to replicate what happened to you. They've done what you said you were doing and moved about the Orbs but none of them have experienced the same thing. We're going to need to recreate the experiment exactly the way you did before … soon."
Cassie knew where he was going. "You want me to try again."
Dulain bowed his head for a moment. "Exactly."
"That … seems a little crazy, sir. We won't be in controlled conditions."
"Ah, but you see … the difference between the techs on Earth trying this and you is that you were in hyperspace. You see, I'm theorizing that there's some type of energy being spread around the internal part of the ship during faster-than-light travel. Something that allowed the Orb to connect with you."
"And they haven't figured out a way to simulate that," Cassie

muttered, staring off into space. He might've been right. It actually made some sense. "Or you're saying they haven't even tried that yet."
"So far it hasn't seemed to dawn on them but it will when they exhaust all the other options." Dulain shrugged. "I'm confident they'll figure it out eventually but when you return, I want you to try proving my theory. My apologies, I occasionally like to get into the weeds."
"Okay … I'll speak to Doctor Rindala about it."
"Maybe he even knows, but I'm getting the feeling that while they might've done more than scratch the surface they still haven't gone very deep. These things are an absolute treasure of information but we're incredibly cautious about how we claim it. I need you to be a little more daring while you're away from Earth. After all … there's no one to complain. Much at least."
"They certainly aren't going to allow us to take one on board this time," Cassie said. "Not with the admiral and meeting a new race. We're trying to keep the ones we have safe."
"Yes, I know. I'm working on getting the new Orb transferred back to the Gnosis for our experiment. I should have an answer by the time you get back and we can see about tapping into the thing. Maybe you'll get better data as well, especially since everyone involved will know what we're trying to do. It won't be an accident."
"Next time then." Cassie sighed. "Something bothers me about all this. We know there are many Orbs out there and we know they were able to communicate at some point. Can they be used to spy on one another?"
Dulain shrugged. "Excellent point. One we should look into."
"Who's working on the virus?"
"Harper's people and a couple of ours." Dulain smiled. "You'd like to be on that team."
Cassie shook her head. "No, I *would've* been on that team. I feel I'm in the right spot."
"And you are." Dulain stood. "I believe that. Good luck and great work, Senior Agent. We'll talk again when you get back and see about pushing the boundaries of the Orb, huh? Should be very exciting."
Cassie watched him go, somewhat annoyed by how he used her new

AIA rank. He emphasized the *senior* part as if reminding her of some obligation she already recognized and felt. The focus almost felt like a threat. Still, he gave her a great deal of latitude and didn't ask much. In fact, he pushed her to try things she would've thought would be forbidden.

I guess things could be worse. He could've told me I could start a war.

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Desmond needed to get back aboard the Gnosis. They were going to depart Earth in less than fifteen hours and Vincent was left to finish all the preparations. However, Admiral Reach threw a meeting on his calendar, requiring him to visit Doctor Harper and Thayne on his way out.

This had better be exceptionally important. We really don't have time to be side tracked right now.

He figured whatever they had to say could've waited until they returned but then again, Admiral Reach rarely suggested a course of action that was completely out of place. As an old soldier with decades of experience, he'd proven to know what he was doing. High command gave him jurisdiction over the space program for a reason. Gamma Alpha operated under his watchful gaze long before they had an enemy but once hostile aliens made themselves known, he turned out to be a fortuitous choice for leading the teams. Desmond knew him from his fighter pilot days and they'd gotten along fairly well back then.

When the Gnosis captain's chair opened, Desmond applied partially for the chance to go into space but ultimately to work closely with Reach again.

Doctor Harper saw him enter the lab and smiled brightly, waving. "Good morning, captain! Thank you for coming!"

"No problem," Desmond said. He took a moment to look over several tables laden with technology, most of which he'd never seen before. Terminals lined the walls, each blinking with multi-colored lights. Thayne stood at one of them, typing quickly on the touch screen, his

eyes intense. “What’s going on?”
“We’ve been studying the virus in the signal,” Harper replied. “And I wanted to give you a quick update. So far, we’ve got some promising results when it comes to building a defense. Naturally, we’re having to do everything in simulation but we’re hopeful that, with some more time, we’ll have a definitive method of fending it off.”
“Excellent.” Desmond nodded. He wondered if this was truly why they brought him in. Such a revelation could’ve been offered through a text message or over the com. “Was there anything else you needed to talk about?”
“I’m coming with you,” Thayne said. “I just need to finish this final script … I’m almost done.”
“Yes, he’s been working feverishly with me to nail down a realistic method of testing our defenses. Gil has also been helpful and he’ll be staying here while you’re away.”
“That’s what I heard.” Desmond looked around. “I suppose he’s a good choice considering his field of study. How has he taken to hanging around a couple Orbs?”
“Oh, like a child in a candy shop, I assure you.” Harper snapped her fingers. “I forgot to tell you, we transported up some prototypes we’ve managed to test for the power armor your marines use. Chief Engineer Webber should be able to install them. They are short term personal shields, much like the Tol’An were using.”
“Short term doesn’t sound like them,” Desmond said. “What’s that mean?”
“Well, we haven’t figured out how to make the power cores small enough, even for the armor, to keep them going longer.” Harper shrugged. “These will take several shots from small arms and maybe two from something bigger. I figure it’s a little advantage but one nonetheless. Any protection’s better than none, right?”
“Sure.” Desmond smirked. “Darren will be happy. Thanks.”
“Oh, one more thing, I wanted to give you an update on our efforts with communications. Remember we talked about it on the ship but since then, we’ve discovered that the Orbs themselves could essentially be used to speak to one another through great distances.

We've come up with a theory that those who built these must've found a way to send smaller Orbs with their spacefaring ships."
"I'm not sure about that," Thayne said. "They may have been traveling *within* Orbs themselves. Maybe not even using space vehicles but teleportation. It stands to reason considering these can do so much more than we ever thought possible."
"We've been debating that part, mostly because mine is practical and Thayne likes to … take leaps of logic to fulfill fantastic theories."
"They haven't been disproven," Thayne added.
"Anyway," Harper interrupted before he could go on. "It's been pretty interesting and we're currently exploring the option of how we would generate such a thing. Even if it only had a couple of uses, we'd be able to speak to you while you're out there and get messages back and forth. Maybe even send two or three along just to be safe."
"Definitely sounds useful." Desmond smirked at his next question because he knew the answer. "How long do you think before we'll be able to try such a thing?"
Harper's enthusiasm waned. "Unfortunately, we're at the very early stages of this thought process. Finding the data isn't proving as easy as we hoped but I'm confident we'll have *some* idea within a year … maybe less with two of them available. But you know how it goes, you have to dream it before you can make it."
"Of course." Desmond understood having a vision. It was imperative for leadership but he particularly admired the way scientists approached problems. They imagined a thing then found a way to make it happen and their objectives tended to have farther reaching ramifications than a combat scenario. "You ready, Thayne?"
"Yes, I am." Thayne grabbed a bag and approached. "Let's go."
"See you around, Doctor." Desmond waved to Harper before they left the room, heading for the hangar. "How do you feel about these negotiations with your people? Do you think they're going to be receptive to a partnership?"
"I believe so." Thayne seemed hesitant so Desmond pushed.
"What're the chances of them being less than genial?"
"Slim. Our people are proud but they are not monsters. We've made

contact with several races, not all of which are our technological equals. Subjugation ended before we took to the stars." Thayne frowned. "I've caught up on your history and we have some similarities. Slavery, for example … and internal wars. We come from a common background."

"I hope that brings us together then."

"Understanding begins with similarity." Thayne's expression finally brightened. "We may be aliens to one another but I think my presence here has proven we can work together in a positive way to achieve results that are beneficial to all sides. And you have proven yourselves to be reasonable. After all, you saved my life."

"I would like to think you guys would've done the same," Desmond replied. "But after seeing the Kalrawv Group in action and facing down the Tol'An, I guess we could've had the misfortune of only encountering people like them."

"We had a run of bad luck with other planets for a while," Thayne said. "I recall several expeditions returning home with poor news about how they were received or discussing how they were told never to return. I often wondered if they were simply bad at diplomacy or if we were truly finding the worst curmudgeons in the galaxy."

"Maybe a little of both." Desmond wondered how humanity would've reacted to the Pahxin approaching them peacefully. He really had no idea what to expect. Would his people have assumed positive intent? He kind of doubted it. Cinema helped paint alien encounters as dangerous and apocalyptic.

He figured paranoia would've ruled over cautious optimism. Which is precisely why their missions had been secret. When they returned with news of the Pahxin, he figured they would have a big press conference and let the world know about everything they discovered. Hopefully, with overwhelmingly *positive* evidence of a partnership, humanity could be happy about their actions.

I bet the polls will be on two sides of the spectrum, Desmond thought. *There will always be those who don't believe an outside force can be reasoned with or trusted. Such individuals don't trust the government or military and never miss an opportunity to undermine the establishment due*

to their fear. We'll have to battle that behavior to stay unified.
"You look thoughtful," Thayne said as they left the building. The sun beat down on the open courtyard and Desmond felt sweat immediately form on his back. "Are you truly worried about this gathering?"
"I'm not sure what I am," Desmond replied. "Anxious maybe. I want it to be successful but I'm a soldier. I see danger, sometimes in places it doesn't necessarily exist. It screams at me to be cautious in any unknown situation. For example, your people have been to this station before and we haven't. Already we'll be at a disadvantage."
"It's a neutral space," Thayne said. "The people who run it are quite benevolent, I assure you. They have kept the peace for a *very* long time. You don't have to worry about something happening there. And our ships rarely fire first. They only do so on the terrorist organizations, like the Tol'An for example."
"I … think that was meant to be comforting."
"It was."
"Nice try." Desmond smirked. They climbed a flight of stairs to the landing pad and boarded the waiting shuttle. He felt a sense of relief when he noticed the pilot was someone he didn't know. *Thank God it's not Jeb. I'm not in the mood for his shenanigans*. "Will you be going over with the admiral?"
Thayne shook his head. "No, I'm there to do the initial conversation when we arrive but the admiral and his staff will be going without me. I'll be briefing him along the way on several key points but our people made it clear they want to have a conversation that is natural between us. Though … I must say it is a little ridiculous."
"Yeah?"
"I am telling the admiral everything I can to make this successful. Surely, my people know this."
"Speaking of which, are you planning on heading back with them?"
"I'll be speaking with their representative while we're there," Thayne said. "And I'll be making a case for staying with your people to help with the research. Believe me, part of the conversation will revolve around giving up one of your two Orbs, a point your people are dead

against. If I can offer my services as a Pahxin representative, I might alleviate that pressure."
"That would be good. I know we're pretty set on keeping them."
"Even though you cannot do so from a military perspective, correct?"
Desmond hesitated but nodded. "Yes, I believe everyone's aware of that fact."
"We may want it, but we will not steal it." Thayne leaned back and took a deep breath as the ship took off. When they were airborne, he finished his thought. "Much as we would like to have the item, we learned long ago that taking things from a culture breeds nothing but ill will. Besides, what if you come up with creative solutions to problems we struggled with?"
"You think it might be advantageous to allow us to have both."
Thayne shrugged. "It very well could be. Who's to say? We've had it for a *long* time and we're still struggling with mysteries. Why not give you a chance? You're hungry for knowledge and extremely creative in your own rights. We never came up with the information about the virus, for example. That counts for something."
Desmond didn't disagree. More importantly, it didn't matter what either of them thought about the situation. The military high council would negotiate with the Pahxin and neither Orb would be on the table. However, the humans might invite some scientists to help with the process.
At least Desmond hoped they'd be so reasonable. The problems everyone wanted to solve would benefit from as many intelligent eyes on them as possible. Qualified individuals, people who had far more years studying the devices would make the most sense. But sometimes, politics didn't care about such things. No one liked to compromise.
A com message buzzed his computer and Desmond brought it online. They were still a few minutes away from breaking atmosphere and then another ten minutes from docking with the ship. "Captain Bradford here."
"Good morning, sir," Vincent replied. "We see you're en route. The admiral arrived roughly five minutes ago. I've shown him to his quarters and he's settling in. He stated he'd like to be on the bridge

when we go into hyperspace. After hearing about it so many times, he figures this is his chance to experience it for himself."
"He's going to be disappointed if he's hoping for bells and whistles," Desmond said. "Anyway, I anticipated that. I'm more curious about how much he wants to be involved in the day to day operations of the ship. Will he spend most of his time in his quarters or does he want to stay on the bridge?"
Vincent clicked his tongue. "I hadn't thought about that. Deacon's taking us out today and going into hyperspace. Do you think I should get Zach?"
"Did Zach work with Salina on the coordinates?"
"Yeah, our typical navigation procedures were followed. You know how our pilot is. He put in some hefty hours and I figured it isn't a grand event to fly for several hours and hit a couple buttons."
Desmond considered the situation for several moments. Vincent was correct. Just about anyone could perform the simple task of initiating hyperspace. However, they did have a VIP on board and that usually meant ensuring the best people were at their posts. Then again, Reach tended to be a down-to-earth type of leader so it was unlikely he'd be critical of the decision.
"Let's give Deacon his chance to shine," Desmond said. "Even if he isn't going to be doing anything too wild. It'll be good experience for him to do something basic under pressure and I'm sure as soon as he sees Reach sit down, he'll start sweating."
"Understood. We're scheduled to leave sixty minutes after you arrive. Is Doctor Rindala with you?"
"He is," Desmond replied. "I ran by the lab and got some news I'll share with you when we've got a quiet moment. I'm going to sign off. We're about to break atmosphere. Talk to you soon, Vincent. Bradford out."
Desmond tapped the computer and leaned back in his chair, taking a deep breath. Turbulence began to shake the ship, which struck him as odd that it took so long. The rattling only lasted a couple of minutes before everything went silent and they had achieved orbit.
Experiencing such motion while in control didn't bother him but when

someone else flew …
He didn't care for being at the mercy of other pilots, regardless of how good.
"I trust everything's ready for us," Thayne said. "Your communication seemed to be about our departure?"
"Admiral Reach is already on board," Desmond explained. "I'm curious how he finds the ship so I'm anxious to get aboard. I was able to sneak up there yesterday for a quick inspection of my own but now I need to know how he did. In fact, I'm pretty sure he sent me to get you so he'd be able to check things out alone."
Thayne tilted his head. "Why would he do so?"
"Sometimes, people will say something different when their boss is around," Desmond said. "It's a tactic used by leaders the world over. Believe me, I've used it with a couple of my department heads when trying to understand how we're doing with a particular situation or problem. And before you ask, yes, I think it sounds like undermining too."
"So why do it?"
"As someone in charge, if you have to take point to solve an issue, then it's best to get your information from the horse's mouth."
Thayne's brows furrowed and he leaned back. "How do you extract such things from a beast? Is it painful?"
Desmond chuckled. "Sorry, it's just a phrase. It means you go to the source to find out what's going on and talk to the people directly. That way, there's no translation, no salving of the information. You know exactly what's happening. You can craft a solution because you personally heard what's going on."
"I see … A personal investment works better for science too, I assure you." Thayne turned to look out the window. "Unfortunately for me, I became detached from the base level experiments. I was elevated to an administrator and suddenly was in charge of a team of scientists. It was not as fulfilling and often times, I didn't feel like I knew what they were doing."
"Then you have a good understanding of what I'm talking about," Desmond replied. "Men of action tend to have a hard time with the

transition to leadership. You have to trust other people to do the work you'd been doing before. When you see them working inefficiently, for example, you have to remember you're there to coach them, not scold. So I get it."

"Yes! Oh, the trials we have faced." Thayne smiled at his own drama. "Thank you for this talk, Captain. I feel better."

"Good." Desmond smirked as well, looking out the window at the Gnosis. They would be there in a few minutes now and he could get to work. He felt an urgency to get aboard, a sense that he had a lot to do. *Relax*, he reminded himself. *These few minutes might be the quietest you experience for a while. Take them in and enjoy it while you can*.

Desmond drew a deep breath and settled into his seat. He might not be able to get all the way to relaxation but he could at least not stress about the workload ahead. There was plenty of time for that. Just then, he enjoyed the uncharacteristic silence of traveling through space without the constant demands on his time he could expect soon.

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Chapter 4

Cassie secured her quarters for departure and took a moment to go over her calendar throughout the flight to the space station. She had a mandatory rest period stuck in the middle of things but also a number of brief conversations with the engineering team and Thayne. Vincent sent her a personal invite for a meal as well.

A knock on her door drew her attention and she double checked to see that she was free for that period. No one should've been contacting her, not without notice and she hadn't made enough friends on the ship to warrant a random visit. Considering they were less than a half hour out from dropping into hyperspace, she wondered if there might be some problem.

"Come in," Cassie called. She stood before the door opened, feeling ridiculously formal in her white uniform. The pants suddenly felt restrictive and the jacket gathered under her arms, pinching the skin. *I swear, I need to get one of the crew uniforms here and toss this fancy ass thing.*

An unfamiliar woman stood in her doorway, wearing the dress uniform of the military. The rank on her shoulder said she held the rank of major, a ground force designation and there were a couple of ribbons indicating she'd served at least three tours. Dark hair was gathered in a neat bun and her blue eyes scanned the room in an instant.

"Cassandra Alexander, I presume." The woman entered, clasping her hands behind her back. "I'm Major Christina Dawson. I believe you were informed about me."

"I was told you wouldn't likely make contact unless you needed to," Cassie said. "Is something the matter?"

"No," Christina shook her head. "But I like to put a face to the name before I have to rely on them in a pinch. Call me superstitious, but it's important in our line of work. Your support system literally becomes your life in many cases. This is an unknown situation to the extreme and the admiral has no idea just how dangerous it might become."

“I’m sure he has a good idea,” Cassie replied. “He’s spoken to Thayne … er … Doctor Rindala so he’s got a solid understanding of what to expect from the Pahxin.”
“You forget, I’ve been in those meetings and I can tell you with absolute certainty, our illustrious leader has no idea what he’s walking into. Thayne isn’t being as forthcoming as you’d like to believe.”
“What do you mean?” Cassie fought hard to keep a neutral tone but she felt a sense of indignation hit her. Thayne was becoming something of a friend and she didn’t like where the conversation was going. Did they truly doubt his honesty? His integrity? Had the AIA become too paranoid for their own good? “I’ve spent a lot of time with him. He seems on the level.”
“Ah … Are you developing a friendship then?”
Cassie hesitated before answering. “I wouldn’t say that.”
“I see. You haven’t been in the field before then.”
“This is my first field assignment, yes.”
Christina nodded. “The first rule you should’ve been told is to keep things professional. As soon as you find yourself falling into a personal relationship, your objectivity will falter. In the case of Doctor Rindala, you need to remember that he came to us after being under duress. He’s not the most reliable of allies because he joined us out of absolute necessity.”
“That doesn’t mean he’s against us,” Cassie replied. “I believe he genuinely wants our people to cooperate.”
“Perhaps so. But I’ve heard him give vague answers when it’s fairly clear he could be more direct. Add to that the fact he’s got a close friend who just happens to be a Pahxin criminal, one that we had to leave behind on Earth to avoid causing an incident or risk having to give the man up. Those are compelling facts to worry about.”
“I see.” Cassie chewed the inside of her cheek before continuing. “So … is that what you’re here to tell me? That I should be cautious?”
“No, I just wanted to meet the woman I’d be relying on if something terrible goes down on the station. I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to protect the admiral … and whoever else I can save. Let’s ensure you have access to my personal com.” Christina tapped at her computer.

“You should be receiving an encrypted application.”
Cassie frowned at her screen. “This is pretty intense. Who developed this code?”
“One of the newbies.” Christina shrugged. “Seemed pretty robust so I decided to use it this time. Please ensure you can access my com before we leave the system. I’m not sure how many opportunities we’ll have to meet after this.”
“I will. It’s going to take a while to install.”
“I figured.” Christina sighed, looking around the room again. “So … how bad is hyperspace?”
Finally, something she doesn’t seem to know everything about. “That depends on the situation,” Cassie replied. “Sometimes, you barely notice but under duress, we’ve had to make some pretty crazy plunges. You mostly notice the first time.”
“Ah …”
Cassie noticed nerves playing at the corners of Christina’s eyes. She tried to mask it but the signs were all there. “It won’t be a big deal. We’ve done it plenty of times now so you probably won’t even notice. In other words, all the scary tests have already been performed. It’s becoming pretty routine.”
“Good. I suppose you can be brave in many situations but flying faster than light … traveling quicker than anything ever has in history … It’s pretty intimidating.”
“I felt the same way our first time. The crew already did it twice before I came on board. Once to the outer reaches of our solar system and once to get back. They were pretty cool customers when we initiated the last couple trips, even when we were all about to die from the planetary core explosion.”
“I read about that.” Christina shook her head. “You guys sure know how to play it rough out here.” Salina’s voice announced that they would be initiating hyperspace in twenty minutes. “I’d better get to my quarters. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it and I look forward to working with you.”
“You too.” Cassie watched her go and flopped into a chair. The doubts Christina put in her head made her angry. She didn’t want to worry

about Thayne or any of the others for that matter. How long had it taken for Christina to become jaded? She didn't look all that old so it couldn't have taken too long.

Lord, I hope I don't follow that path. Becoming like her … It would be like sacrificing one's humanity. And for what? Security? At the cost of indulging the ultimate paranoia. The AIA constantly looks for threats in the shadows but how long does it take before every motion looks dangerous? I'm walking a fine line here between loyalty and maintaining my sense of self.

This mission would not test Cassie, not terribly but she felt like a day would come when she'd be expected to take some kind of stand, make a decision she didn't agree with. When that time came, she wondered how she would handle it, both during the event and after. If she dreaded anything at all, it was the point of no return she knew was out there, waiting for her arrival.

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Desmond took to the bridge on the verge of leaving hyperspace. Vincent sat beside him and the admiral took the seat normally occupied by Cassie. His aide, Christina Dawson, stood, holding the safety bar near the elevator. He didn't know why she needed to be present but he didn't bother to ask.

The departure from Earth went off without a hitch, despite Deacon's nerves. The young man practically trembled when he initiated the process and the admiral congratulated them all. Reach seemed impressed by their efficiency and he complimented them for their professionalism during what he considered the most frightening part of his career.

"I've read the reports about hyperspace," Reach said, "but I could not possibly imagine what it was like to go into it. Thank you all for your patience with my staff and I. Believe me, we all hold you in high regard for your bravery. Such a test … that first time you launched … must've been equal parts terrifying and exciting."

"Believe me, it was," Desmond replied. "But we were confident in the

simulations and tests. Our own departure came after years of study. Those scientists wanted a victory."

Reach left them alone throughout the flight but he returned to be on hand when they were able to communicate with the Pahxin. Chances were good they would have communications the second they dropped out of hyperspace. Desmond was glad to relinquish the first contact responsibilities to his superior.

Much as I thought my soldiering days were over, after our last three missions, I've found myself leaning more heavily on my tactical skills. Desmond considered the situation for a moment, thinking back to why he joined the Gnosis in the first place. *I thought I'd be an ambassador to other planets … even if there were no people to meet.*

Fate had another plan for humanity and as they were plunged into a galaxy of conflict and dangerous organizations, Desmond adjusted easily into the combat role. He hoped it would not be necessary when they arrived at the station. Thayne made it clear any fighting between humanity and the Pahxin would not go well.

They have an entire fleet of warships and we've got one and a half. Their orbital defense vessels could travel about the solar system quickly enough but they lacked the ability to travel to distant stars. As the hyperdrive technology sophisticated, they would be retrofitted accordingly but until that time, the Gnosis was the only ship that could leave Sol.

So we have to be polite with these guys. I wonder how Reach was briefed by high command. Desmond tried to breach the subject to find out what their orders were but the admiral wouldn't discuss them. That made Desmond all the more nervous. If they were there strictly for a diplomatic mission, why keep any of it a secret?

I really hope we're not going to try to pull some BS here. Clever as we are, these people have dealt with many others in their time and they likely have a better grasp over not only the technology at their disposal but in deception as well. This is not the time for intrigue. We should be putting our cards on the table.

Desmond personally believed that handing over an Orb wouldn't have gone amiss. They could take one anyway so why not provide some

good will right away? On the other side of the argument, he understood the desire to keep them both. After all, they were learning a great deal, more than ever before. Advances might come quicker. *And that could put us on an even ground with our new allies*.

"I'm disengaging the drive," Zach said, "in thirty seconds."

Here we go.

Desmond noticed Admiral Reach's knuckles turning white a moment before the deck rattled and the viewscreen cranked on. Space opened before them and the other members of the bridge crew launched into action, compiling reports from the various departments throughout the ship. He waited patiently but he could tell his superior was anxious.

"We've worked out most of the little bugs." Desmond kept his voice low. "And engineering monitors all the major systems. Whatever we hear in a few moments should be fairly positive overall."

"What're you most concerned about?" Reach asked.

"Getting a hail from our potential allies," Desmond replied. "I want them to know it's us who just hopped into the area and that we're not here to cause trouble. Whether we're talking to the Pahxin government or the station administrators, I'd put announcing our presence at the very top of our priority list."

"All departments report green," Vincent said. "Zach, how close to our coordinates did we arrive?"

"We're thirty-thousand kilometers off," Zach sighed. "I thought we did a better job but I guess it's not too bad."

Desmond explained to Reach, "We've managed to come much closer to our planned arrival point. Regardless, we ensure we're aiming for a space which has plenty of room for *massive* miscalculations. That's why we've been so far out from Earth when we've returned from our missions."

Reach nodded. "Considering how far we just traveled, I'd say thirty-thousand kilometers sounds pretty reasonable."

"I can do better, sir," Zach said. "But thank you."

Desmond stood and joined Salina at her station, peering over her shoulder. She was scanning the area, staring at the screen intently. He

waited for a few moments, trying to make sense of the figures dancing across the monitor on the right. When he couldn't make heads or tails of it, he finally just asked.

"What do you have?"

"I wish Cassie were up here," Salina replied. "She'd be able to help with some of these energy readings but other than those, we're definitely where we're supposed to be. Three hours to get to the station too so while we weren't where we wanted to be, at least we're closer to our end destination."

"Other ships in the area?"

"Not that I've detected yet." Salina hummed, gesturing to a blip on her screen. "The station is on my scans and it's pretty big … though not as large as the other place we visited. I'd say three hundred people could live there without feeling too cramped."

"Can you hail them from here?"

"Once we start moving," Salina turned to him, "I can get them on real time com in a half hour."

"Sounds like we've got a little time to kill then," Desmond said. "Zach, get us moving toward our destination. Vincent, let everyone know we'll be ready to get over to the station in just under four hours."

"I think I'll stick around," Reach added. "When we can speak to the station, I'd like to be on hand for the conversation. Christina, head down and let the rest of our party know when we'll be leaving. See about the shuttle and ensure we've got everything we need. I suppose we'll want to take a quick meal break before going as well."

"Yes, sir." Christina seemed hesitant to leave, which struck Desmond as odd. As an aide, she'd proven to be particularly clingy to Admiral Reach. She was a new addition to his staff, someone who joined him just before the trial tests of the Gnosis but as the program progressed, she became more prominent at his meetings.

I wonder what her deal is. Trying to get bumped up to colonel, I suppose. I'd love to take a look at her records. Desmond knew there was little chance of checking up on the admiral's personal staff but he felt curious. *Maybe a quick chat with her before we get back to Earth will reveal something. I'll try to set something up*.

Vincent spoke to the admiral, “Do you think this is going to be a straight forward conversation, sir?”
“I’m hoping so,” Reach replied. “We’ve been preparing for this since we sent the message. It’s time to see whether or not our efforts have been well spent. My advice is if we simply do all our jobs efficiently, we should come out with a new ally and be prepared to meet these various threats you’ve encountered with a unified front.”
“I hope you’re right, sir,” Vincent said. “It would be a real tragedy if this went poorly.”
“More than you realize, Commander.” Reach narrowed his eyes, staring at the screen. “More than you realize.”

***

Cassie entered the tech room where Thayne worked on one of the computers. She came up behind him and nudged his arm, offering a smile when he turned a confused look in her direction. They were less than a half hour from the station, preparing to board as soon as the Pahxin arrived.
“Your friends seem to be late,” Cassie said.
Thayne shrugged. “A possibility. The distance between our home and here is much greater. Also, it is difficult to judge timing with faster-than-light travel … which you may find ironic, but it is the truth.”
“I suppose.” Cassie flopped down in a chair. “How concerned are you about all this?”
“Not very at all. They will either find common ground and work together or they will not. Negotiations may linger for a while but eventually, regardless of how this plays out, the two sides will become friends.”
Cassie had listened to the initial conversation between Admiral Reach and the administrators of the station. It was formal, cordial and direct. They sent the rules of the station, which essentially amounted to variations of a single point: no violence. A brief history of the station came along with the rules.
The Gaeliran people who built the place lived on a nearby world

which went through its own warlike phase. Fortunately, they got all that combat out of their systems before they took to the stars. When they contacted their neighbors for the first time, they were able to successfully negotiate peace and, as simple explorers, they went on their way.

Wars sprouted up between different factions throughout the years and many of them approached the Gaelirans, asking them to take sides. They never did, stating their total neutrality in hostile matters. This didn't go over well for them at first but the Gaelirans found a way to make it right.

They offered their space station up as a safe, neutral space for cultures to negotiate and after a couple times, it became a tradition. Their neutrality became respected rather than resented. A statistic in their introduction stated those who used their station for their gatherings signed peace treaties over war eighty-five percent of the time.

At the end of the digital brochure, Cassie found a list of reasons why other cultures have never attacked the Gaelirans or given them grief. While they forsook the warlike tendencies of their pasts, they maintained a fairly impressive vault of weaponry. These were used on those who broke the rules or threatened their people.

In the entire history of the station, they only had to exercise the power of their weapons once and even in that case, they simply disabled the offending craft. After that, no one else bothered to cause trouble in their areas. *That bodes well for us but eighty-five percent conversion seems low. I guess blood can stay hot regardless of the decision to attend a peace talk.*

"Have you ever been here before?" Cassie asked.

Thayne nodded. "Once, a long time ago. But it wasn't for a treaty. A science committee reserved the space. The Gaelirans have a voracious appetite for knowledge. I suspect they prefer such things over the negotiations they traditionally host. For example, you won't see them at the table for this but during our event? Dozens of them gathered."

"Nice." Cassie was about to ask another question when Salina's voice piped over the speakers.

"Attention, all hands to their stations. We have incoming ships and

will be sending our VIP party to the station shortly. Please attend to your posts immediately."
Cassie stood and headed for the door. "See you later, Thayne."
"Good luck with the work up there. If you need anything, I will be down here monitoring the talks. I am issuing positive thoughts that this works out admirably for both sides."
"Me too, Thayne," Cassie replied, heading into the hall. She thought back to what Christina said about him and whether or not the woman was right concerning his loyalties. There seemed to be no reason for him to cause trouble and indeed, it behooved him for both sides to get along.
As a scholar of the Orbs, he would want to be close to them, not ostracized because the Pahxin and humanity didn't get along.
I guess we'll see soon enough.

***

Desmond scowled at the screen as four Pahxin vessels emerged from hyperspace not even twenty-thousand kilometers from the station.
How did they make such a precise jump? What kind of navigation equipment would allow it? The questions didn't stem from idle curiosity. He was thinking tactically.
If the Pahxin can hop around to such close proximity, they can use FTL as a blitzkrieg-style attack method. We wouldn't have any chance to get defenses going in that regard.
They were larger than the Gnosis and a quick scan indicated they were heavily armed warships. Each of them carried enough firepower to level a small moon, putting them into an entirely different class than the ships they had encountered before. The Tol'An and Kalrawv Group couldn't field such vessels and Desmond was quietly grateful for it.
If these guys wanted to take something, they just would. This is part of the negotiation process. They're showing us what they've got so we can determine how far we feel like pushing them.
"Hail those ships," Reach said. "Get me on speaker and see if we can't

have visual communication."
"Yes, sir," Salina replied. "They've acknowledged and are establishing a link now."
Cassie came onto the bridge and paused just in front of the door. Desmond nodded to her once before redirecting his attention back to the screen. The stars faded out and a figure appeared who could've been any other human. Brown hair was swept back from a high brow, brown eyes peered at them through a squint. He was clean shaven with narrow cheeks.
His uniform, black with silver piping on the seams, could only be seen from the middle of his chest up but the collar was buttoned high on his neck. When he spoke, the computer automatically translated his words for them so they only heard the mechanical voice. The effect was somewhat eerie since all tone was lost in the English words coming from the speakers.
"Greetings, humans. I am Captain Ulian Hataran. Our ambassador will be heading to the Gaeliran station momentarily. Are you prepared for the meeting?"
"We are," Admiral Reach replied. "Is there anything you need from us before we begin the process?"
"No. Merely note that this sector is a peaceful one. Any hostilities will be met with extreme force from us … or our hosts. And believe me, I have seen the might of the Gaelirans in simulation. No one wishes to push them."
"We have no intention of indulging any hostilities," Reach said. "We are here to negotiate for peace and a union between our two people. I believe this will be beneficial. I'd like to introduce you to the commander of this vessel, Captain Desmond Bradford. He will be holding the ship down while I'm on the station."
"Yes, I see." Ulian frowned. "We will be in touch. Ulian out."
The screen went dark, shifting to a view of the station and stars again.
"Charming," Vincent muttered. "Maybe they just don't translate well."
"Soldiers," Desmond said. "I'm not taking it personally." He turned to Reach. "Seems like we're ready to get this show started. Shuttle should be prepped."

“Wish us luck, Captain.” Reach nodded and headed for the elevator. “Do ensure we don’t engage in any hostilities.”
Desmond nearly dropped a snarky reply but merely nodded, returning to his seat. Captain Hataran likely found himself in a position where he didn’t know why they were bothering to negotiate with humanity. If he understood the situation, if he had been briefed on the Orbs, then he might have offered a military solution to get at least one of them back.
Considering they were all out there at the Gaeliran station, their government decided on a peaceful course of action. Still, Desmond understood the notion. The simplest path often proved to be the quickest. Depending on how desperate they were to acquire one of the Orbs, violence made the most sense.
“Salina.” Desmond turned in his seat again. “I trust you’re ready to monitor the proceedings.”
“Yes, sir. I’m on it.”
Cassie sat down and logged in. “I’ll get a decent scan going of the Pahxin vessels. Maybe we can learn something from how they’re put together … weapon placements, power core … Anything would be of value.”
“Let’s make sure they’re okay with it,” Vincent said. “Last thing we need is for them to get all huffy ‘cause we’re prying.”

***

Christina spent more time in boring meetings than she could possibly remember. The admiral’s duties took him through the paces of such things frequently. Unfortunately, meeting with aliens didn’t prove to be any different. Two bodyguards accompanied them and on the flight over, they proved to be terribly nervous.
But the negotiations themselves would likely be just another meeting involving a whole lot of talk.
The accommodations were nice enough. When they arrived in the hangar, it looked much like their own but upon departure, they found themselves walking down a hallway with dark wood paneled walls at

the top and some kind of bone colored material at the bottom. The floor was carpeted and it felt like a resort.
Not at all what Christina thought of when she considered a space station.
The Gealirans proved to look much like humans but they kept their heads shaved. Their eyes were set a bit wider and their lips were thin. It gave them a cartoon like experience but they'd taken the time to learn English, though it was thickly accented with emphasis on the vowels.
The admiral's party was led to a conference room with refreshments lining the wall and a massive table with several chairs. The Pahxin arrived moments later, dressed all in black. Such severe appearances surprised Christina but the color probably didn't mean the same thing to them.
She wore her black dress coat, white pants and a white blouse. It was what passed for a dress uniform in the army. Admiral Reach wore the same but he had more ribbons and awards than she did. The bodyguards came in loose fitting bodysuits, still nice but more utility. If they needed to do their jobs, they wouldn't be hampered by fancy outfits.
At least this stupidity doesn't include heels. I'll ditch the jacket if something goes down and make something happen.
Christina introduced herself to the primary bodyguard of the Pahxin, a man named 'Lothan'. He could speak decent English and seemed friendly enough but he definitely kept a wary eye on her party. The bigwigs found their seats and she headed over to stand behind the admiral.
The Pahxin ambassador stepped forward and bowed to Admiral Reach before greeting him in decent English. "Greetings. My name is Raeka Vinn, ambassador of my people. I come authorized to speak on my culture's behalf and to express our excitement to work closely with you in these negotiations."
"Thank you," Reach replied, bowing his head in return. "I'm Admiral Garlan Reach and I look forward to ensuring we find common ground and a platform to build a solid relationship upon."

They carried on with a few more pleasantries before relying on the computer translators but the effort they made was worth noting. Christina wondered if they should've attempted to do the same. They had Doctor Rindala around and the Orbs would've provided enough data to learn a few lines in their language.

Regardless, she took mental notes of everything that transpired so she could report back to the AIA later. This meeting was an absolute gold mine of information, from the way the bodyguards carried themselves to the uniforms to the speech patterns and body language. As the first peaceful gathering with an alien species, it provided them with a wealth of opportunities.

An hour passed where things seemed to be going well when an alarm went off, a high pitch, staccato beeping that continually blared overhead. *God, let that be some kind of meal time alert*. Christina's whole body tensed as she waited for some explanation. The Pahxin seemed nervous as well and the admiral held his hands up to try and placate them.

"Perhaps we should contact our ships to see what's going on." He turned to Christina. "Can you call the Gnosis?"

"I'm on it." Christina paced away, lifting her computer. She tapped the screen but noticed there was no connection. Something was jamming her. *Internal? External? What the hell?* Not even the advanced tech she had from the AIA could get through. Were the Pahxin pulling something?

As she turned, she noticed they were experiencing the same challenge. *Okay, so we've got a bigger problem*.

"Admiral," Christina said, "I believe we should get you to the shuttle right away."

"But we're right in the middle of this." Reach shook his head. "I think we'll wait to see what's going on."

"That might be too late." Christina scowled, turning to Lothan. She used her computer to help translate. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"I am afraid I do not," Lothan replied in slow English. "We cannot reach our ships and the Gaelirans have stated they are also unable to

speak with their people."

At least the peace lovers haven't gone crazy just yet. Christina considered the options but Reach was set on waiting. *I guess we'll let the trouble come to us.* She assigned the bodyguards to the door they came in through and they locked it. The Pahxin watched the other one. They didn't even have windows to peer out and see what was going on. *Blinded and waiting for something to go down. Excellent. I hope this is some kind of false alarm. For all our sakes.*

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Chapter 5

Desmond studied the scans Salina and Cassie pulled of the Pahxin vessels. They received permission to do so though their potential allies seemed reluctant. Some aspects of their vessels matched the Gnosis while others went in radically different directions. The largest departure seemed to be in their propulsion.

Pahxin scientists successfully completed reactionless drives, engines that propelled them without the need for thrust. This gave them a high degree of maneuverability and consistent motion. Furthermore, their power cores used some other type of material, one the Gnosis scanners couldn't easily identify.

Must be something native to their home world.

Regardless, they still maintained rear thrusters. Desmond figured they kept them as a sort of backup, in the event something happened to their fancier drive. Of course, they might also use it for combat to get a little extra speed. *I'd love to see this thing in action.*

Desmond was about to get into their weapons when Salina gasped. He glanced in her direction, brows raised. The woman rarely seemed surprised so whatever she saw had to be serious. He gave her a moment to study her screen as her hands flew over the controls. When she finished, she turned sharply in her seat.

"Captain, I've picked up multiple incoming ships." Salina gestured to the screen. "They're moving on us fast."

"What?" Desmond scowled. "Do you have an ID?"

"I believe so … at least for two of them. They appear to be the Tol'An. I've matched silhouettes to the attack on Earth. These are *definitely* the same."

"Get Ulian on the com." Desmond stood as the connection established. "I assume you guys see the incoming?"

"We do," Ulian replied. "It appears they have managed to commandeer two of our destroyers and two scouts. We'll take care of it. If these scum think they can disrupt these talks, then we shall have to convince them otherwise. Ensure that you are out of the way."

Desmond glanced at his computer and counted six Tol'An ships. "They outnumber you. I think we should help."
"If you genuinely believe you can do more than be in the way, then by all means engage the enemy." Ulian offered a thin smile. "Do ensure your pilots know which Pahxin to shoot. Ulian out."
"He's a real piece of work!" Vincent shook his head. "I'll get our fighters ready. We should have them out in less than five minutes."
"Good." Desmond turned to Zach. "Ready the weapons and sound battle stations. I can't believe these guys would pull something like this. They can't possibly think they can win. What's their angle?"
"Maybe they simply want to cause some damage," Vincent said. "It's a good place to try it."
"More likely," Cassie interjected, "they're hoping to cause some kind of conflict between our two people. If they could start a war between the Pahxin and Earth, then we'd do the work for them. I'm guessing their biggest obstacles are all parked here right now."
Salina sighed. "If you're right, then they can't leave any survivors. Not even the Gaelirans."
"But I thought those guys were super scary," Vincent replied. "At least, that's what I read about them."
"I suppose it depends on if they get attacked," Desmond said. "Maybe the Tol'An think they won't say anything. Who knows? Regardless, let's contact the admins of that station and tell them what's going on. I'm pretty sure they'll want to know why we're about to start blasting away at enemy ships in the middle of a peace summit."

***

Gizan Relik stood on the bridge of the Tol'An assault craft, staring intently at the station before them. His plan remained simple: get aboard the station, kidnap the dignitaries and depart. The other ships in his small fleet would be enough of a match for the defenders to keep them busy while he worked.
There will be much death today and not even the Gaelirans will be able to prevent it.

He knew about their fanatical devotion to neutrality. They defended it like an animal might protect its offspring. However, they were not prepared to contend with a quick assault, a daring boarding action. His well-trained units would easily cut a swath through any defenders but the real threat remained with the bodyguards of his targets. Pahxin men and women would be prepared to fight to the death to defend their ambassador. Gizan didn't know what to expect from the humans but after hearing how they had trounced the Tol'An both at their home world and later when they snatched the Trindisha from their clutches, he knew not to underestimate them.

I will cut them down regardless.

The pilot broke his reverie, "We will be able to board in a few moments, sir."

"Attach yourself to the following bay," Gizan said, programming coordinates into the computer. "That will be the easiest port to break through. A maintenance hatch that is not comfortable for the regular people they admit to the station. Is our expert prepared?"

"I am, sir," the voice behind him came from a highly trained individual who had hacked into Pahxin systems many times in the past. "I can begin the process shortly so it's ready to open upon our arrival."

"Excellent. Ensure that it is. We will not have time to wait. The faster we work, the less time their security will have to settle in." Gizan's eyes narrowed. "Fire to kill. We cannot allow any of them to survive. Our departure will be made in much more haste than our arrival, I absolutely assure you."

"Master," the pilot spoke. "What about the fighters? How are we going to evade them?"

"That's what the rest of the ships are for," Gizan said. "You do not worry about them or their duties. Our sole purpose is getting on that station, collecting our cargo and getting off. Anything else is a mere bonus. If the Pahxin lose their warships here, so much the better but the human ship … I believe that is their only vessel capable of hyperspace."

"Should we not prioritize that as a target?" The pilot asked.

“No. It would be a benefit to our cause, but we have not been sent for that. Besides, we did not come equipped for such a conflict. This is about surprise. And when they see us on that station, I promise you the terror and shock will be quite real. Prepare yourselves. We are nearly there.”

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden stared straight ahead as he and his team raced to meet the enemy. His scanner showed dozens of Pahxin fighters bursting from the four warships not far off, and they adopted a scattered formation. His own people used a vanguard but they were spaced far apart to avoid any area attacks by the larger enemy vessels. None of them thought they’d be called upon for this particular mission. All the pilots were in the rec room when the alarm went off requiring everyone to get to their battle stations. At first, Dennis was convinced it was a drill but the timing didn’t make sense. There was no way that Captain Bradford would put them through paces in such a delicate time.

If the Pahxin misinterpreted what their scans told them, it could’ve easily led to a fight.

The quick briefing stated they would be meeting the Tol’An again. It was the only good news about the scramble. Most of the Gnosis crew wanted another shot at them after the bastards attacked Earth but their second mission didn’t involve them at all. Much as the soldiers wanted to wage war against them, one ship wouldn’t be enough.

Even if we beat their asses when we got the second Orb. Dennis tried not to be arrogant about their victory but it was hard not to feel a little smug. Yes, they experienced some losses but not before they sent them packing a second time. *Maybe if they wouldn’t have divided their forces, we would’ve had a harder time tearing them up*.

“We’re approaching the first fighter screen,” Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring called out. The younger man had been working toward a promotion and Dennis was giving him more responsibilities. While he wasn’t technically leading Mustang squadron on the mission they were

currently on, he was operationally in charge for the moment. “Prepare yourselves.”

Dennis checked his shields and noted they were at full strength. Weapons were hot and ready to go. He checked the distance before he’d be in firing range and tensed up. *Ten seconds.* The enemy ships lit up, their weapons powering on for the first attack. Pahxin ships arrived moments before them and chaos erupted some distance to the left.

That’s a lot more ships than I thought we’d face, Dennis thought. He was grateful for the help but as they zoomed in with Charger squadron at their side, he realized that had they been alone, they would’ve been hopelessly outnumbered. *The initial scans are showing we’d be looking at three to one and we fielded twelve ships!*

A beam sizzled his shields with a near miss, bringing Dennis fully back to the moment. He fired a burst with his guns then initiated his top thrusters to drop low. The attack connected with a target, the metal burning up in the enemy’s shields.

They flew by one another, each ship a momentary blur before Dennis and Shane banked hard to the left and came around to find a firing solution. All around them, the dogfighting became intense, violent dances taking place as pilots struggled to gain an advantage. Weapons fire lit up the darkness around them, potshots meant to misdirect targets into better positions.

Bright flashes winked all around them as different vessels began exchanging beam shots. Com chatter increased. Charger squadron dove into some immediate action, calling their targets as they began blasting away. Despite all the activity, it felt less chaotic somehow, more controlled. Perhaps it was the fact they were flying with allies.

Dennis picked a pair of ships for them to focus on and they sped toward them. The targets were trying to line up shots on two ships from Charger squadron but their prey proved too wily. “Computer’s trying to acquire a target,” Shane said. “What do you think about missiles? Might chase them away from our allies.”

“Hm.” Dennis shook his head. “No. A proximity explosion to the other ships might be enough to cause some damage. Let’s stick to beam

weapons and make this attack surgical. I'm going to take a shot at the one on the right. It might push him into your line of sight. Get ready … You might only have a moment."

Dennis spun to the right for a better angle and unleashed his beam weapons, depressing the trigger several times to break up the attack into bursts. They flew toward the enemy and he spun wildly away, the corona from his engines blurring together as he evaded. Just as he righted himself, Shane fired.

Shields shattered, tiny electric lines appearing in space before vanishing in a bright flash. The second and third hits pounded into the metal and melted the fuselage, shutting down the engines. A brief tumble took the ship a good fifty meters away from his allies before the vessel exploded in an orange-purple ball.

"Scratch one," Shane called. "Good show."

"Not done yet." Dennis veered to the left to avoid a retaliatory attack and once again flew by another target. Charger was hot on the enemy's tail, firing guns the whole time. Shane moved to support him and Dennis caught up as well, lining up for a shot. The three of them synced up and unleashed all at the same time.

Each attack hit the rear of the vessel as it attempted to escape. Dennis didn't even see the shields go down this time. The ship was obliterated instantly, pieces and debris scattering in all directions.

Not bad so far, Dennis thought. He looked around, his heart nearly stopping in his chest as he saw one of the enemies dashing toward his left side. A direct hit caught him as he initiated a dive and an alarm went off in the cockpit. "Alert," the computer stated in a calm voice. "Alert. Shields down to fifteen percent. I repeat …"

"I heard you," Dennis grumbled. "I've been hit … Systems check isn't done so I don't know how bad it is."

"Can you still maneuver?" Shane asked. "Wow, that guy who got you is coming back around. He wants to finish the job."

"A little help then?"

"Don't worry … I've got it." Shane hesitated for a moment and light flashed over Dennis's controls, illuminating the cockpit. "There you go. He's done."

“Automated repair has kicked in to fix my shield generator.” Dennis checked the diagnostic quickly. “It overheated. Crap!”
“Fall back and give it some time,” Shane said. “We can hold this rabble for a few moments.”
Dennis noticed that the larger ships were heading toward the Gnosis and the Pahxin warships. He counted seven in all but they looked dangerous. His scanner didn’t indicate what they were packing but it must’ve been potent if they were willing to charge in without even slowing down.
I wonder what they have up their sleeves that makes them think they can pull this off. Dennis frowned and kicked on his afterburner, taking himself out of the dance floor of combat. Dogfighting continued all around him, ships exploding here and there while others merely took damage. He saw the tally on his own screen as his allies suffered minor damage.
The Pahxin fighters seemed to be doing a good job but they’d at least lost three of their number already. They entered the battle with a larger force but Dennis didn’t think they could afford heavy casualties. Maybe it was just the way the humans thought about death that brought the thought to mind but either way, their newfound allies were no joke when it came to combat.
Dennis pulled away from the fighting only to find he had one of the enemy ships hot on his tail. *Are you kidding me?* He initiated evasive maneuvers, trying to get further away from the opponent. If he led it back toward the Gnosis, automated defenses might save his life but it was a long trip and they’d have some of their own problems to deal with.
A couple blasts flew by him to the left then over his head. He continued to move erratically, trying to ensure he was an impossible target to hit. “I could use a little help over here if anyone’s close by!” He spoke louder than he intended to over the tactical com net. “Sorry to be insistent.”
“I’m on my way,” Shane said. “But it’ll be a minute.”
“Settle down, humans,” a heavily accented woman’s voice broke over the com. “I am coming.”

Dennis saw one of the Pahxin ships flying toward him on the right. His opponent nearly got him with another shot and he pulled hard on the stick, trying to draw closer to his potential savior. He gritted his teeth as the inertial dampeners fought to keep up with his motions. Even with all his fancy flying, he couldn't shake his pursuer.
"Warning, missile lock." The computer let him know the enemy was about to drop some heavier ordnance on him and he cursed his luck.
"Prepare for countermeasures."
"Don't bother," the woman said. "I've got this." She fired her weapons, turning the enemy ship into ash in an instant. There wasn't even an explosion. It simply turned into debris and was gone.
Dennis swallowed hard, glancing over his shoulder then turning back to look at the woman's ship. "How the hell did you do that?"
"That's our disruptor beam," she replied. "What is your name?"
"Dennis Arden … Squadron Leader of Mustang."
"I am Dala Ahnshyr. Stick with me and I will protect you while your shields repair. We do not have time so divert power as you can, human. We must re-enter the fray and stop these criminals before they cause more trouble."
"Working on it," Dennis muttered. "Shane, I've got this back here. Stick with the action nearest you. I'll be back as soon as I can."
With the kind of weapons these Pahxin are sporting, I doubt we'll be in this brawl for long. Lord, they're more powerful than we thought. Of course, there has to be some reason they haven't finished these criminals off. I only hope we don't find out what it is today.

***

Cassie tried desperately to break through the jamming signal so she could communicate with the station. Salina turned her attention to coordinating their ships. Though they couldn't talk to the admiral's party, they could still chat amongst themselves. She took her place in the combat mission, leaving the tech stuff up for grabs.
I can't even tell the Gaelirans that we're not responsible for this, Cassie thought. *I hope they understand and know how to read the Tol'An*

signatures.

If the station was under total lockdown for communications, they probably couldn't reach out o the nearby planet for assistance or support. That meant the Gnosis and the Pahxin ships were the only ones who had any chance of engaging the enemy and stopping them in a timely fashion. *Unless our allies reached out to the Gaeliran high command.*

Cassie tried to hail one of the ships and got them on the line a few moments later. A man's haughty voice took the line but his strange language was translated into the toneless computer articulation.

"What do you need, Gnosis?"

"Have you informed the Gaelirans of what is happening?"

"We cannot get through the interference," came the reply. "And the planet is not answering either. It seems the Tol'An have figured out how to target jamming signals while not wasting the energy to hit the entire system. That is why we can still talk to our people … and you it seems."

"Understood. I'm working on an algorithm now that should get us in touch with our people. I'll share it the moment I'm done."

"If such a thing works," even the computer sounded snooty, "we would be happy to see it but we will not hold our breath. Good luck."

Cassie frowned. *Okay, check. We're pretty much monkeys to these people. Good to know.* Thayne never showed such an attitude so she wondered where it came from. The Pahxin had encountered other creatures throughout the galaxy. Had they treated them all in such a way? Did each encounter they had involve their potential allies having to prove themselves?

Perhaps these particular Pahxin hadn't heard about what the Gnosis had already accomplished. Whether or not the Gnosis needed to strive toward some expectations shouldn't have mattered. It seemed odd that anyone would lack all faith in humanity, all things considered. Thayne's message must've spoken of how they performed against the Tol'An before.

Why would the Pahxin military act so superior *given the circumstances?*

Cassie focused on the work at hand but before she could progress,

Salina appeared behind her, leaning close. “I’ve picked up a ship flying straight for the station. Can you confirm my scan? I’m picking up a strange reading about it … something I’m not sure what to make of.”
“Okay.” Cassie peered at the screen and frowned. The smaller vessel was moving as fast as a missile and it emanated a strange signal. When she traced it, a realization dawned on her. “They’re trying to open the doors remotely. That’s what you’re picking up. They’ve accessed the Gaeliran network.”
“So they’re heading inside.” Salina shook her head. “They are either trying to kill the dignitaries or capture them.”
“I would support that assertion.” Cassie gestured to her terminal. “I have to get a connection to the admiral. We need to tell them what’s going on so they know help is on the way.”
“If we can get them there.” Salina turned away. “Captain, we have picked up a small vessel attempting to board the station. It looks likely they will succeed. Recommend we prepare the marines to assist and extract Admiral Reach.”
“Agreed.” Desmond nudged Vincent. “Make that happen. We’ve got that new lieutenant on board. I’m sure he’s itching to get out there and prove himself.”
“Yes, sir.” Vincent started making the arrangements.
“We need to get a shuttle through this mess.” Desmond hummed. “I’m sure they’ll grab Jeb. He’s insane enough to make it.”
“The capital ships are almost in range,” Zach said.
“Sir,” Salina announced. “Captain Ulian is hailing us.”
“Put it on the screen.”

***

“Captain Bradford,” Ulian began without preamble. “Much as I do not believe your people are ready for intergalactic affairs, I would rather work with you than have you be a hindrance. It seems our pilots are already cooperating which is good. Now, I need you to understand the position we’re about to be in and how to proceed.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”
“This is not a typical Tol’An attack force,” Ulian explained. “They have never come at us head on. Their preferred tactic involves hit and run. Harassment. There’s a danger here. I’m sure you have noticed their attempt to board the station?”
“Yes, we’re sending people to help now.”
“Oh?” Ulian seemed surprised. “Good. I will not send additional forces then. The problem with station fighting is that it can be close quarters. Smaller forces tend to work the best. The most fighters the Tol’An could possibly field with their vessel is fifteen and that’s if they are practically sitting on one another.”
“Our people should be able to handle them.” Desmond hesitated a moment. “Do you think they’re planning on fighting to the last man here or do they have something else in mind?”
“If I was to guess, they only care about distracting us long enough to do their work on the station.” Ulian shrugged. “I believe we can stop them *and* cripple their forces by taking out these ships. Please hold to the right flank and we will attack both down the middle and to the left. Can you manage this?”
Desmond had half a mind to protest the question but he knew there wasn’t time. The man would be terse given the circumstances. They were about to conduct a major military action and like it or not, Ulian had more experience. *I need to trust his judgement and assume positive intent.*
“Yes,” Desmond replied. “We’ll hold our end. Let us know if you need additional support. Our fighters are engaged there though so ensure your friend or foe is working before you do anything too crazy.”
“We understand this type of combat, Captain.” Ulian offered a thin smile. “I believe we can now show you exactly how it is done. Ulian out.”
“That guy has nerve.” Vincent shook his head. “I’ve briefed the marines and they’re hurrying to get out of here. I expect they’ll be in the air inside of ten minutes.”
“I hope they can go faster than that,” Desmond said. “I doubt the people on the station have so long … unless I’m seriously

underestimating the Gaelirans."

***

You might be underestimating the bodyguards, Cassie thought. *Or Christina. If she's truly as good as Dulain said, she might be able to get Reach out of there.*

The signal to the station proved to be particularly challenging to overcome. Every algorithm Cassie tried either made the interference worse or did nothing at all. She analyzed it again, looking for ways to replicate it when she realized it was changing subtly every time she tried to break through.

What's the source? Cassie followed it to one of the capital ships. *There you are*. A quick scan indicated it was the smaller Tol'An vessel. The weapons weren't as potent but it carried heavy defenses and probably fielded the majority of the fighters that were causing trouble at the moment. *Taking them down isn't likely but maybe I can disrupt them at the source.*

Cassie painted the target and considered her next move. There were a few options but one of them involved calling in the bombers. Considering the heavy action going on outside, it might be unnecessarily dangerous. The marines would be heading over there regardless but once they got on board, they'd be unable to communicate.

Maybe I can jam them back. The thought held some merit and she brought up an application, blasting the enemy ship with a tremendous amount of static. The whole process took less than a minute but it ultimately failed to provide the desired result. Their signal remained strong.

Are you kidding me? How? A scan of the activity showed their shields deflected it. *Oh. So I can't even get through their defenses. Hm. Maybe if I flood the area around that ship but I'll need a probe to broadcast the signal. Otherwise, I'll be sending it straight through all our forces which would cause trouble with our own coms*.

"Captain, I need to launch a probe at the enemies," Cassie announced.

“I might be able to disrupt that signal if I can.”
“Go for it,” Desmond replied without looking back at her. “If it makes it through, that’ll be a miracle.”
“It only has to get close.” Cassie prayed she was right as she prepped the device and set the coordinates. “Launching now.” She tapped the touch screen harder than she needed to, eyes glued to her screen. The probe flew of, plunging toward the heavy action between the various pilots.
She hoped it was small enough to not to be noticed. It would take it nearly ten minutes to get through the action then another five to arrive at her target. Once there, she could initiate her application but even that wasn’t a guarantee. *It’s better than nothing, I guess. We have to try something … I just hope this isn’t all over before it gets there*.

***

Gizan waited for the doors to his ship to open, standing off to the side. If someone waited to fire on them again, he would not be the first one to be shot. When nothing happened, one of his men chuckled. “It appears the Gaelirans are staying true to their neutrality. There’s no one out there.”
“Then let us commence with the mission.” Gizan led the way, stepping out into the maintenance corridor. He had been to the station before, long ago as a younger man. As a bodyguard for a dignitary, he wandered the halls during a week-long negotiation. Though he didn’t remember the event, he recalled the layout quite well. “Follow me.”
Gizan approached the next door and tapped the button, shaking his head when it opened immediately. *They lock nothing. These fools do not care about security*. He entered the next room, a well-appointed affair with dark paneled walls and carpet on the floors. A Gaeliran held his hands up, calling out to hold fire.
“I wish to speak! What are you doing here? This is a peaceful station! You are infringing upon our neutrality rights!”
Gizan lifted his weapon and shot the man in the face. The body dropped to the floor and he continued moving, stepping over the

corpse. The Pahxin and humans would not bother trying to surrender or talk. When they heard the weapons fire, they would be fully defensive. Unlike the fools on the shipyard station, these might be well trained.

I suspect this is where I will lose the majority of my people. Gizan already had to replace three men from the previous action and he intended to send the less skilled ahead as cannon fodder. Considering what they were facing and the stakes of the game, winning would be worth all their lives.

Another two Gaelirans attempted to talk to them and he gunned them down as well. *This station will be coated in blood. Come to me, filth. I will cleanse you all.*

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Chapter 6

Christina's ears twitched as she swore she heard a weapon fire. She drew her pistol and turned to Lothan. "Did you hear that? I think it came from outside our door."
He nodded his head. "Ambassador and aides … please position yourselves under the table. It is for your safety."
Reach came close to Christina. "Do we have an extra gun?"
"Sir, while I'm certain you've shot someone before, I don't think risking you in a firefight is an option."
"I can help."
"We've got six people ready to do this." Christina looked him in the eyes. "I have to insist that you stay safe."
"I have no intention of cowering under a table!"
"Then don't cower," Christina replied. "Just keep out of the line of fire until we're done. We have the advantage in that they have to come to us. This doorway won't allow them to rush through easily. Providing they don't pop off some grenades, we should be fine and then we'll get back to the shuttle. For now … I really need you to get to safety."
Reach scowled at her but complied, joining the other ambassadors.
Christina let out a sigh of relief. *Thank God.* She tried to scan the area, to see if she could figure out what was coming for them but the jamming extended to all functions on her tablet. The bodyguards moved to either side of the door, weapons held high.
Christina stood just to the left and a few feet away, straining to hear more. Footsteps approached, coming rapidly. Another couple shots rang out, beam weapons that hummed and spit. Someone screamed. Something heavy hit the ground. Someone tried to open the door, the sounds of them violently tapping the panel quite clear.
Well, here they come. She cleared her throat. "We're not letting you in."
"Filthy human scum," a man's gruff voice replied. "We will skin you alive if you do not open this door immediately."
"Oh, well … since you're so polite …" Christina rolled her eyes. "On second thought, I've changed my mind. You're going to have to figure

out how to get in here without our help."
They started shouting in Pahxin so rapidly and violently her computer couldn't keep up with the translation. She turned to Lothan who wore a grim expression. He shook his head at her and motioned to the door.
"They have a computer expert who can open the door and while he works, they are looking for a key."
"Lovely. How long do you think it'll take?"
"Not very."
"Do you think we could make it to your shuttles?" Christina asked. "While they're fiddling with this door."
"It depends on how many there are," Lothan replied. "They have access to both sides of this conference room. However, if there are not very many, it may be worth the risk.
Christina thought back to their walk through the station to the conference room. The area had been pretty open with no cover to speak of. If they ran for it and were attacked, there wasn't anything to hide behind. A better tactic might have been to remain where they were and wait for backup. If only they could communicate
"I'm sure our people will send help," Christina said. "As soon as they notice what's going on."
"I completely agree." Lothan scowled. "I believe we should wait here … at least until such time that we must move."
"Alright, I guess we hold them here," Christina replied. *Hurry up, Gnosis. I hope you noticed what's going on over here. We could really use some damn help*.

***

Desmond grabbed his seat as the ship shook violently. One of the Tol'An destroyers scored a direct hit to the bow. Salina called out that the shields held but the impact caused minor concussion damage. Engineering would start gathering data on what they needed to repair.
"Zach, what happened to evasive maneuvers?" Vincent asked.
"Sorry, sir." Zach's hands moved over the controls in a blur. "Their targeting systems are absurd. We're engaged with one of the Pahxin

military vessels…it's nothing like the ships we fought back on Earth or even when we encountered them at the other planet. These were built for professional combat."
"Cassie," Desmond said. "Can you jam their targeting? Buy us some room?"
"I'll try … I'm still waiting for the probe to get into position anyway."
"Return fire with everything we've got," Desmond ordered. "How are the fighters doing?"
"Holding their own," Vincent replied. "The one man Tol'An ships aren't as dangerous as the Kalrawv Group proved to be. Plus, the Pahxin have their own people out there partnering with us."
The ship vibrated almost imperceptibly as the weapons discharged. Every gun and beam weapon went off at the same time, sending out enough firepower to tear through an unshielded ship in seconds. A moment later, the engines kicked in and Zach initiated a quick maneuver to nudge them backward.
The extra range might mean some of their shots miss when they retaliate, Desmond thought. *Good call.*
"Several direct hits," Zach said. "They turned just before though and I got them on the Starboard side."
"Salina?" Vincent asked. "What are you reading?"
"Their shields on that side have dropped to forty percent," Salina replied. "They're dealing with some passthrough damage as well."
"They're turning again," Zach announced. "Yep … showing me their Port side now."
"I see what they're up to." Desmond leaned back. "Are we ready to fire again? If so, let's whittle down their shields on all fronts. Eventually, we'll have to overload them."
"They're retaliating." Zach worked the controls again and the ship lurched hard to starboard. Desmond was jostled in his seat but they didn't experience the same pounding as before. Still, something hit them causing a shimmer more than a heavy shake. He glanced at his own computer to see what came up.
"Shields seem to have taken the brunt of that one too," Desmond announced. "Do you have anything more specific? How dangerous

was that hit, Salina?"
"It seems …" Salina paused. "They were attacking the shields specifically. They're dropping in that section. Some kind of … strange drain. It's lingering."
"What do you even mean?" Vincent asked. "What's lingering?"
"I see it," Cassie added. "We have to drop the shields in that area I think. Reboot them. Can we turn so they don't have a good shot on our weakened side?"
Zach fired the weapons again.
"That might not have been a good idea," Salina said. "The power drain from our beam weapons dropped those shields further. They're at twenty percent and if they drop to zero, it will likely overload the generators. I might not be able to get them back online without extensive repairs."
"Turn us," Desmond said. "Put our good side to them and Salina, get those shields back up. I don't care what it takes."
Zach initiated the maneuver. "I hit them," he added, "solid blow to the other side. Looks like the shields held better there though. They might've reinforced them."
"Very likely," Cassie said. "I think—"
Before she could finish her sentence the ship shook violently and the lights dimmed. Desmond spun toward Salina. "What the hell was that?"
"Looks like someone hit us with a missile…or even a bomb." Salina shook her head. "Extensive damage to decks seven and eight … crew quarters and one of the medical bays. Casualty reports are coming in."
"Was that a smaller ship that deployed the attack?" Desmond asked. "How'd they pull that off?"
"It must've been," Vincent replied. "I'll work with the fighters to flush that thing out."
"Good, get it out of here." Desmond shook his head. "Can we get the shields back online?"
"I'm working on it now, sir." Salina actually sounded frustrated, which surprised Desmond. He'd never heard her get annoyed before. "I'll know in a few moments."

“Do what you can … but hurry. We’re not in a place where we can afford to take this slow.”

***

Dennis’s shields returned to full power and he redirected his ship back to the fight. Dala formed up beside him as they made their approach, her ship less than five hundred meters away—close enough to make out some of the details.

They operated with twin thrusters in the back and deployable wings on the sides. The cockpit was conical with the pilot occupying the top near the back. Dark gray panels covered the hull and the shields made the whole thing look slightly blurry. Weapons bristled on the bottom and sides, beam weapons by the look of them.

“Thanks for staying with me,” Dennis said. “Do you need to return to your wing?”

“I’m with my assignment,” Dala replied. “When we return to the fray, I’ll make my way back to the others. For now, I think we need to get you back to your people, don’t you think?”

Dennis wasn’t going to argue. Mustang squadron was deep in the thick of battle, taking on dozens of Tol’An fighters. Their allies were winning the fight but that didn’t mean the fanatics were slowing down. They continued to throw themselves into the brawl, seemingly oblivious to self-preservation.

Their ships aren’t as good but they’re proving to be more dangerous than the Kalrawv Group at this point.

“Mustang One, come in.” Vincent’s voice filled his cockpit. “Can you read me, over?”

“I read you,” Dennis replied. “What’s going on?”

“I see that you’re not in the middle of the combat zone.”

“Just taking care of some damage. I’m about to be back in it.”

“Fall back,” Vincent replied quickly. “I have an assignment for you so don’t engage.”

“Okay … but I’m with one of the Pahxin fighters. She needs to get back to her wing, sir.”

“If she’s there, you might see if she’ll back you up. We’ve got a ship out here harassing us with missiles. It’s caused some pretty significant damage. You need to find him and take him out.”
“Wow … Okay, I’m on it.” Dennis frowned. “I’ll let Mustang know I’m not coming right back and head there now. Do you have a signature or anything?”
“It was last seen off the port side somewhere. Get over there and begin your investigation but I doubt it will be hard to find. It wants to finish us off, I promise you that.”
“Okay, we’re on it.” Dennis switched over to Dala as he adjusted course for the Gnosis. “Change of plans. We have a ship causing some trouble over here. Want to come back me up while I get rid of him?”
“I can do so,” Dala replied. “We can’t afford you to lose your largest ship.”
Dennis dropped a message to Shane letting him know what was happening and to continue the fight there. He would join them when he finished. *If I pull this off and don’t find a way to get shot down myself. God knows if this guy is capable of evading the automated defenses of the Gnosis, I might be in over my head.*
Dala allowed him to take the lead, following close behind and to the right. He wondered about his situation, how he ended up with one of their new allies flying with him. Much as he hated to use the word, it felt like fate. They needed to learn to work together and perhaps the negotiating table wasn’t the place to do so.
Out there, fighting the Tol’An, they came together like soldiers and when they finished, providing they won, they’d have a victory to share. As long as the politicians didn’t turn it into a pissing contest, it might do more for Pahxin/human unity than all the conversations and gift giving in the universe.
The Gnosis became larger as they approached. A Tol’An destroyer engaged them, a slightly smaller ship in comparison to the human craft but quite deadly from the scans. Cannon fire from the Gnosis lit space up and they scored a solid hit on their target. Dennis frowned at the action.
Why didn’t the Tol’An even try to evade that? They didn’t so much as

move.

"Did you see that?" Dennis asked Dala.

"Yes, this is looking more like a distraction every moment."

"A distraction?" Dennis hummed. "Not an attack?"

"Oh, they are attacking … but why?" Dala clicked her tongue. "Their objective is not likely the destruction of our vessels but of our alliance. Depending on how they planned to go about that task, it may be quite the surprise. Of course, if I were willing to bet, I would say they have attacked the station as well and are trying to assassinate our ambassadors."

"That would be screwed up! I can't believe—" Dennis paused as his scanner picked up motion on extreme range up ahead, something small. "I think I've got our target. Did you pick anything up?"

"Negative," Dala said. "I'll follow your lead. Take us closer."

Dennis redirected his course and engaged the afterburners. The extra propulsion crammed him into his seat and he forced himself to relax into it. Inertial dampeners eventually caught up, alleviating the pressure. They only had to fly a few moments before the blip reappeared.

Dala chuckled over the line. "I've got it now. They think they're clever hovering around debris. It masks their signature but not completely. Hit and run … Hide while the larger ship contends with the more immediate threat then dash out to take advantage of any damage done. It will be a fast ship with heavy weapons but limited defenses."

"So easy to take down, right?"

"Target locks will be ineffective so not easy." Dala paused. "Note that we've been detected and they know we're onto them."

Dennis checked the scanner and sure enough, the enemy ship was on the move, flying away from the Gnosis. The speed surprised him and he'd have to engage full throttle plus the afterburners to catch up. Both would put a drain on his beam weapons but at least the guns would be unaffected.

"We'd better hit it," Dennis said. "Though I'm not entirely sure where they think they're going."

"Their goal is to lure us away from the battle, removing two combat

pieces from the engagement. If we ignore it and go back, it will simply continue harassing the Gnosis. The Tol'An fail to grasp the fact we have good reason to track this thing down and destroy it. If not for this fight, then the next one."

Dennis engaged his engines and hit the afterburners, shifting more power for additional speed. Once he was underway, he asked, "Is this ship their own design or something?"

"A modification on an old one," Dala replied. "They took our original fighters and threw out everything they didn't need, including life support. The person piloting that ship is wearing a full environmental suit and that limits the amount of time they can fly. They also lack the ejection thrusters required to save the person should the ship experience a problem."

"Jesus, that's insane!"

"I am not sure what you mean by that…"

Dennis cleared his throat. "Um … nothing. Just … slang I guess." They were closing on the target but not quickly. He checked their range and they were well away from the Gnosis, having traveled over five thousand kilometers. *At least we got this guy off their backs. First part of the plan accomplished. The next part seems like it'll be a lot more difficult.*

"Keep going straight," Dala said. "I'll see what I can do about driving him into an attack."

"Wait! How are you going to …" Dennis paused as he watched Dala's ship dart off, leaving him behind as if he were standing still. "Catch … up … wow. You guys are fast."

"I'm sure when the talks are over, we'll share this information. For now … be prepared to shoot."

The enemy turned sharply, banking hard to the left. Dala matched its motion, leading it and firing at extreme range. Purple lights flashed from her weapons, winking out as quickly as they appeared. Though they didn't seem to come anywhere near the target, it swung wildly around, flying away from her attack.

Dennis continued on his course, checking his distance to target. He figured he didn't even have a slim chance of scoring a hit at that range and so he remained patient, letting Dala do her work. She pushed her

ship hard, the thrusters at the back burning bright. Cutting around, she fired again, this time at its rear.
This had the effect of speeding the enemy up and it began flying roughly in Dennis's direction. With it coming closer, the range rapidly became less of a problem. The targeting computer tried to snag a link but failed. Dennis did his best judgement call and pulled the trigger, then readjusted to fire again.
The first volley of projectiles were a clean miss but the second came close enough to make the enemy perform a barrel roll and dive. Dennis adjusted course to pursue just as Dala came up on its rear. She fired again and one side of her beam weapon hit. Shields flared and the enemy climbed, a tight maneuver that should've turned the pilot into paste.
Lord, their dampeners are incredible! Dennis pulled up as dramatically as he dared and he still felt extreme pressure from the G force. Leveling out, he was on target again but his heart skipped a beat when he noticed the enemy was coming straight for him. Rolling to the right, his ship took a blow from energy weapons on the bottom, searing his shields.
The generator issued a warning moments before it began the recharge process. From one hundred percent down to fifty in one shot—and not even both beams. *Dala wasn't kidding about how tough these things are. That was incredible!* He looked over his shoulder, noting the enemy didn't have a chance to come after him.
Dala fired relentlessly, forcing their opponent to go into a fully defensive mode. It swung around, moving like an angry bee but it couldn't shake the Pahxin pilot from its tail. Dennis veered around and tried to catch up with her, moving in low. He called his shot so she wouldn't fly in his path, blasting away at the enemy.
It took one of his rounds and rocketed off suddenly, as if it supercharged its engines. *There's no way the pilot handled that!* Dennis shook his head, staring with wide eyes. "What just happened?"
"He just used his advantage," Dala said. "And it won't save him for long. Whatever fuel he has left will be diminished. We can stay with him and catch up or return to the Gnosis. I do not believe he has

enough to make it home or to cause any more trouble but … the assignment is yours. I will defer to your judgement."
Dennis checked the course heading for the enemy and frowned at what it was racing toward. A small asteroid field lay not even five hundred kilometers away. If it was going in there, it would be easier to hide. Maybe he thought he could call for some help and his buddies would come and save him later.
I don't want to leave him out here to cause more trouble later. "I think we should go after him. Make sure he's done."
"Then we shall." Dala altered course and gave chase. "Be mindful of the asteroids. His signature will be difficult to make out amongst them."
Yeah, I'm sure he's counting on that. "Got it … Let's make it happen."

***

Gunnery Sergeant Geoff 'Heat' Heathrow boarded the shuttle in his power armor and took his customary seat near the pilot's seat. Seregeant Lawrence Gorman, Lieutenant Brent Fielding and Corporal Willis Anderson rounded out the four man team going to help the ambassadors. They decided any additional manpower would be overkill in the tight quarters.
Fielding was new to the team, having only joined the Gnosis a day before they departed. He barely had a chance to speak to the men or let them know his expectations before they were thrown into a mission with him. All Heat knew about the man came from stories of his field service. Apparently, the guy was pretty tough.
They expected more time to acclimate to him, that they were going on a milk run where they could chat and get to know their new team lead. Instead, they had to find out what he was made of in conflict, not exactly the best place to build trust. Still, he picked the men with confidence and was the first one to say he'd be right there with them.
I already like him better than our last guy … This one seems to know what he's doing. I'm not afraid we're going to be led astray.
"We'll be there in about three minutes," Warrant Officer Jeb Douglas

announced. He was one of the most daring and crazy pilots in the crew and bringing him along meant they would certainly arrive swiftly but not necessarily safely. “I’m going to recommend everyone strap in for this though. We’re going to be hauling some serious ass.”
“Thank you,” Fielding replied. “I’ve heard stories about this guy and I’m assuming all of you are quite familiar. We’re going in near the Pahxin shuttles as it’s closer to the Gnosis. I’m thinking there’s a possibility that we’re going to be shooting right away so be prepared for that eventuality. HUD check in flight. Let’s fall out, Mister Douglas.”
The shuttle launched without preamble and the moment they cleared the deck, Jeb hit the thrusters and propelled them out. Afterburners kicked in and the ship hurtled toward the station at a rapid pace. Heat looked out the window, noting how quickly their destination was growing.
A destroyer engaged the Gnosis, exchanging blasts as the two capital ships lumbered in various directions, attempting to mitigate the damage as it came in. Fighters buzzed one another in the opposite direction, engaged in a flurry of combat. A massive Tol’An battleship duked it out with the Pahxin capital vessels.
The sheer chaos in the area must’ve been particularly painful for the Gaelirans to behold, considering their neutral status. But just then, the humans and Pahxin were working to keep them all safe. Hopefully, they’d be grateful or at least not angry. Clearly, the negotiations brought the trouble.
Were their hosts the type to hold grudges?
Probably not, Heat mused. *Someone must’ve brought this kind of nonsense to their door before. You don’t offer a place for peace without the occasional flared temper*.
“Two minutes to contact,” Jeb said. “Communications are iffy so you’re going to need to find a way in when I get us linked up with the door I’ve found.”
“Maybe the internal coms are working,” Gorman offered. “When we get close, we should be able to open the outer door easily enough then com someone for the inner door.”

“Let’s plan to open them both ourselves,” Fielding said. “We can’t be sure of any assistance on there and if we have to, we might need to blow that door and use our own pressurization to keep from killing everyone on board.”
That sounds extreme, Heat thought. *But then again, we are talking about a desperate situation. The Tol’An might blow up the entire station. We can only speculate why they’re really here.*
“Coming in hot,” Jeb said. “Hold on, everyone! This is going to be interesting.”
“I hate when you say that,” Heat called out, gripping his seat tightly. “It always proves to be too accurate.”

***

Christina’s ears rang as total chaos erupted around her. She shoved herself up from the ground and fired her weapon at the smoking remains of the door, three shots disappearing into the smog. People shouted around her, screams of pain and she crawled her way to the table where the VIPs were still located.
Admiral Reach was still moving as was the ambassador for the Pahxin. Bodyguards from both sides engaged in combat, first with firearms but they were forced into a wild melee. Christina realized the time for waiting was over. They couldn’t hold the enemy there. It was time to move.
“We have to go!” Christina shouted. “Admiral, you have to follow me. Now!”
“What about the bodyguards?” Reach shouted. “Shouldn’t they be controlling this?”
Christina cursed under her breath. “I’m AIA, sir. I’m sorry to bring this to your attention now but we don’t have time for arguing. If we want to get out of this alive, you’re going to have to trust me. Come on. Now!”
She pulled his arm and they left the table, moving for the opposite door that had just been destroyed. Reach crouched as they moved and he opened the door while Christina fired suppressive shots at the

doorway. Lothan arrived with his ambassador, prepared to make a run for it as well.

"When this opens," Christina said, "we're going to have to take the lead. Chances are good we're about to encounter enemies out there."

"I agree." Lothan grunted. "I'll take the lead, you follow the rear and ensure no one lags behind. I know the way to our shuttle."

"Okay …" Christina turned to Reach. "Stay in the middle and remain close to the other ambassador. When that door opens, follow Lothan no matter what. Ready?" The door slid aside, revealing the open space between the conference room and the nearest hallway some sixty feet away. "Go! Go! Go!"

The four of them darted from the room, leaving the bodyguards to hold the Tol'An back. Gunfire continued blasting back there but at least immediately, the small VIP party was not pursued. Christina kept her head on a swivel, keeping an eye on the two hallways which might admit attackers.

One came running from the left and Christina whipped off a snap shot, catching him in the throat. He fell to the ground, grasping at the wound as he convulsed his way toward death. The next one must've seen his friend go down because he didn't come out but rather used the corner for cover and fired at them.

Okay, so they aren't trying to catch us, Christina thought, ducking her head. "I suggest we sprint, everyone!"

The others picked up the pace and Christina returned fire again, this time lighting up the wall near their attacker. Just then another man rounded the other corner and started shouting at them. She couldn't make out what he had to say nor was her computer able to translate on the fly but it didn't sound pleasant.

Either he's saying die horribly or surrender. The Pahxin aren't stopping so I'm not going to either.

They made the entrance to the hallway and poured in with Christina hesitating just inside to see how bad it was. *Where are the bodyguards? Come on, guys! Please tell me you made it!* The coms were still down internally and she cursed as she caught up with the others. They were nearly thirty feet away when she started running.

An explosion rocked the station and Christina stumbled into the wall. Catching her balance, she shouted at her companions, “you don’t think they’re shelling the station, do you?”

“I would not put it past them!” Lothan cried back. “They’ve been known to be so thorough before … even with their own people aboard.”

“Fantastic!” Christina shook her head, watching behind them carefully in the event they were being pursued.

They emerged into another room and Lothan stopped them abruptly. “Hold!” He shouted. “We are in trouble.”

“What’s wrong?” Christina asked the question but when she followed his gaze, she didn’t need the answer. The Pahxin shuttle had been destroyed, torn free from its docking clamp. The inner door held but the outer was gone. If it had caused any more damage, they would all be dead. “Our shuttle is in the hangar … not docked like this. We can make it there.”

“We should definitely try,” Lothan said. “And we don’t have to go back the way we came. We can go around down that maintenance corridor there!”

“How do you know?” Christina grabbed his arm. “We could get trapped in there.”

“He seems pretty confident,” Reach said. “And we don’t have time for debate.”

“I’ve been here many times and studied the layout extensively,” Lothan explained, “not just the map they provided but one we were able to fashion ourselves through extensive visits and tours. Trust me, we can get where we’re going through there but we have to hurry. Undoubtedly, our enemies will follow us.”

“Okay, lead the way.” Christina didn’t like it but the admiral was right. They didn’t really have a choice. *I hope Lothan knows what he’s doing. If we get trapped down there, we’re just going to die tired.*

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Chapter 7

A bright flash off to the starboard made Desmond's heart thump harder in his chest. It lingered for a good half minute before burning out. The destroyer was falling back just as they were, giving each ship a little room in the continuing struggle. Both ships had taken some damage but defenses kept them from experiencing any real operational impact.

"What was that?" Vincent asked.

"One of the Pahxin ships," Salina said. "It's … been destroyed."

"That battleship?" Desmond asked. "That thing looked tough."

"Yes, sir." Salina sighed. "And one of the other ships has taken significant damage. The remaining two are … undamaged so far."

Desmond turned to Vincent, "how're the fighters doing?"

"We've had no real casualties, just some damage. The Pahxin are tearing it up out there but they've lost six ships. Their tactics are … daring to say the least."

"I can imagine." Desmond shook his head. "Cassie, where are we at with jamming their targeting?"

"I'm ready …" Cassie tapped her screen a few times. "Now. Initiating a sensor blast."

The hull seemed to vibrate from whatever she did, not like when they fired their weapons. This was more subtle, something that Desmond only noticed due to his overwhelming familiarity with the Gnosis.

"How will we know it worked?" He asked. "Maybe we need to just keep up with the evasive maneuvers?"

"I'll be able to tell momentarily," Cassie replied. "Also … I'm blasting the probe now so we can try to communicate with the station. It might not work for long. Actually … neither of the things I tried will likely last but if either do, we'll have a brief advantage. Initiating the other jamming signal now."

Salina went to work on her station, trying to hail the admiral's party.

Desmond directed Zach to keep the pressure on the destroyer.

Weapons hammered the destroyer again, and it picked up the pace as

it moved away. *Is he actually falling back because he's concerned about us or are we being drawn into an attack?*
"Cassie, I really need an update on whether your jamming thing worked …" Desmond tapped the arm of his chair. "Pretty much now."

***

Cassie's eyes flew over the readings on her screen and she grunted in frustration. "My scans aren't coming back as fast as I'd like. There's a ton of interference in this sector, not just from what we've done but the enemy as well. Everyone's trying to talk to one another … It's a real mess out there."
"Just do whatever it takes," Desmond replied. "And hurry."
Like I'm not hurrying! Cassie kept her frustration to herself and continued typing as quickly as she could. Salina hailed the station, asking them in her calm voice to respond. Cassie's probe scheme might not have been powerful enough to prevent the other ship from blocking their communications, which would round out another failure.
I feel like I need some kind of practice at this point! Cassie clenched her fists and nearly started cursing out loud when her scan data finally came back. *Thank God! What happened?*
The destroyer was experiencing a variety of system failures, not just from her jamming signal but from damage as well. She reported this to Desmond immediately, stating that one of their attacks impacted their shield generators. They still had several but they were under the strain of having to compensate for the broken one.
"Don't let up," Desmond said to Zach. "I want you to time our shots so you are constantly hitting them. We no longer have to punch through the defenses, we just have to wear them down."
"Got it," Zach acknowledged while typing away, presumably programming the attack protocol.
Cassie leaned over to Salina. "Is it the same static you were getting before?"
"No, I believe I'm getting through now," Salina replied. "But they

aren't picking up. The line's mostly clear. Not even the admins are answering though. I hope they're all just busy and not … well … dead."

Cassie's terminal began to beep. A message was coming through a private, encrypted channel. She put her earpiece in and spoke softly. "Hello? I'm here."

"Cassandra!" Christina's voice was colored with static. "I don't know how you all punched through the interference, but good job. We're in a lot of trouble down here. Our bodyguards are very likely dead and we're being pursued. Right now, we're in a maintenance passage heading back toward the hangar."

"Is the admiral okay?" Cassie asked. "The Pahxin ambassador?"

"They're fine and with me now. The Pahxin shuttle was docked, not at the hangar but attached outside. It's been destroyed. I don't know exactly how many enemies we're dealing with here but they've caused some serious havoc throughout the ship. Do you have an accurate count?"

Cassie frowned. "Negative, we're unable to scan the station right now, even with the jamming signal down. I do have some good news. We have marines incoming. If you can rendezvous with them, they should be able to get you out of there."

"Perfect. We'll try to coordinate with them upon arrival. How long before they are here and how much more time do we have with this com signal before it's down?"

"Oh boy …" Cassie looked over her screen for inspiration but there was no way of knowing for sure. "I can't say. I've got a probe producing interference near the enemy ship that caused our coms to go down. If it runs out of power, gets destroyed or they figure out how to compensate … not long."

"Understood. Let's maintain contact for as long as possible. In fact, can you patch me through to the marines? I can give them a general idea of where we're at."

"I'm on it." Cassie brought the marine lieutenant on the line. "Lieutenant Fielding, I've got Major Dawson on com. Can you coordinate quickly before we lose coms again? You might not have

another chance."
"We'll make arrangements," Fielding replied. "Give us a rundown of where you're at, Major."
The conversation progressed and Cassie turned her attention to the battle raging outside. Nothing shook for the past few moments so they must not have taken a direct hit. Zach fired the weapons, scoring a hit on the side of the destroyer. Something sparked on the enemy hull, a quick flash that faded in an instant.
"One of their engines has shorted out," Salina announced. "Their generators are overloading. Shields are likely down but … that isn't stopping them from moving. They're advancing on us now. Speed increasing."
"Take us up while you fire," Desmond said. "Make sure they can't ram us … if that's what they really intend to do."
Their weapons blasted the surface of the ship, plowing into the unshielded bow. Chunks of metal flew clear and electrical pulses danced over the surface. They lost directional control and began to tumble. Zach hit the thrusters and pulled them well away as the enemy ship exploded in a brilliant purple glow that winked out in an instant.
Desmond slapped his knee. "Excellent job. We need a full damage report. What else is going on out there?"
"The enemy battleship is moving away," Salina replied. "The Pahxin have taken out the other destroyer. The scouts are still causing some trouble though and I'm not sure what that tech ship is doing. It remains out of range…but our forces are closing on it."
"Fighters have the field under control," Vincent added. "The enemy fighters are down to less than twenty percent of their starting forces… yet they aren't giving up either. We've got multiple ships damaged but not have been total losses."
"Much better than the fight with the Kalrawv Group." Desmond turned to Salina. "Get Ulian on the line. I want to talk about mopping this up … and figure out what exactly is happening on the station."

***

Squadron Leader Anna Jager found herself lost in the trance of combat, a state she wondered if she'd ever get to again after being shot down during the last mission. Her lack of fear surprised her and she settled back into the fighter with the same calm she always did. The first fighter that buzzed her made her chest tingle but that was the extent of her concern.

Since the moment they entered the fray, she and the others dished out considerable damage to the enemy. Her own kill count tallied six but she paid the price for it with some serious shield damage and a generator that would need to be tweaked. All systems were functioning but they were not in an ideal state.

Anna watched one of the enemy ships acquire a decent firing solution on one of Mustang's fighters and she rushed to intercept, dodging debris and other vessels along the way. As she prepared to open fire, her ally suddenly spun in place, firing two shots that caught the pursuing target right in the nose.

The enemy began to spin and collided with a chunk of hull from another downed ship.

"Thanks for the attempted assist," Flying Officer Alicia Quinn replied. "I had him though."

Anna remembered her from the previous mission. She was one of the pilots who could definitely hold her own but usually at the expense of wild maneuvers bordering on flat out dangerous. They formed up together and redirected their course back toward a larger group of enemies.

"That was some move," Anna said. "Did the dampeners even help?"

"Not really," Alicia replied. "You have to not mind a little discomfort, that's all. Whoa!"

Alicia climbed suddenly as an enemy nearly collided with her. They seemed to be out of control and smoke poured out of one of their engines. Anna fired her weapons at a target directly in front of her, catching them on the side. The shields held but the blow made them dash off, flying away with full afterburners.

"You okay?" Anna asked. "We seem to be driving them back."

“I’m good,” Alicia said. “And their battleship is really hauling ass. Maybe they want to get back to it before they’re left here.”
Another fighter took a potshot at Anna as it flew by but it felt more like it was simply harassing her than trying to cause real damage. She considered pursuing but a proximity alarm went off, indicating an impending collision to the left.
Anna banked hard to the right and hit the burners, narrowly avoiding a missile that had been intent to take her down. She climbed, dragging the projectile with her as it continued hot on her tail. The nearest large vessel was one of the enemy scouts but it was a good thirty seconds away at full burn.
It shouldn’t have significant small fighter defenses. Let’s try this.
Anna hurdled herself for the new target and Alicia caught up.
“Um … what’re you doing?” Alicia asked.
“Taking this missile for a spin.”
“And people say I’m crazy.” Alicia hummed. “I’ll screen for you. There might be some obstacles … like that one!” Something exploded in front of Anna and the pieces of it sizzled on her shields.
“What the hell was that?”
“Small rock. No big deal. But you didn’t want to hit it.”
“Thanks …” Anna glanced at her scanner, noting the missile was gaining on her. *I need to make it compensate to buy some distance*. “I need to maneuver a bit to shake this thing loose.”
“I’ve got a better idea,” Alicia said. “Stay your course.”
Anna watched as Alicia dropped back and flew directly between her and the missile. The projectile broke off and followed the new target, buying Anna a moment to breathe. “You really are crazy! We’re taking that thing to the scout … Can you get it there or am I going to have to pull that foolishness off too?”
“Nah, I’ve got it,” Alicia said. “Just watch my back. I think there are a couple fighters incoming.”
Anna looked over her shoulder and caught sight of the incoming enemies. She dropped low and rolled in place, getting her on course to take a shot. As she climbed, coming in below them, her weapons discharged. Beams tore through the shields and guns ripped apart the

hull. One of the two ships went up in a ball and was gone.
The other broke off from Alicia and came after Anna. They performed a dance, a seemingly choreographed dogfight that went on for a good twenty seconds. An explosion to the Anna's left stole her attention for a brief moment, a flash from near the scout. Anna's opponent fired a volley at her and she took half the attack on her left side.
Another alarm went off, this one indicating that the shield generator was struggling to keep the emitters running. The enemy flew past her and she veered hard, coming around behind him. Opening up with every weapon, the lights dimmed in the cockpit but his engines burst a moment later, his ship disintegrated.
"Good shooting," Alicia said. "Missiles gone … didn't do much to the scout but at least it isn't chasing us anymore. Know who fired it?"
"I don't." Anna frowned at her damage report. "I'm in a little trouble."
"Let's move toward the Gnosis and the others," Alicia replied. "Maybe the automated repair will get you back up before the next little bout … if there even is one."
Various enemy ships winked off the scanner as they were taken out. All through the theater of operation, the Pahxin and Gnosis fighters worked in tandem to finish off the enemy. Their base retreated and it seemed as if they were being driven back. It looked positive, even as Anna kept a nervous eye on her defenses.
Would be nice if we were done, Anna thought. *I wonder if they've succeeded at whatever they were trying to do on the station. It would explain their sudden retreat but I really hope we drove them off before they did something nefarious.*

***

Dennis plotted a path for the enemy they were pursuing and noted that if it continued on its present course, it would arrive at the station shortly. *What would it possibly want to do there? Why wouldn't it try to make it back to its battleship to get out of here?* He checked the com traffic but it was still iffy with all the interference.
Still, messages were making it around the area and apparently, the

marines were on their way to save the VIPs. *That would make a good target. Stop the reinforcements from helping out.* He tried to get a message to the shuttle but they were too far away. If only the noise levels weren't so high from all the activity …

A thought occurred to him. "Dala, can you get a message over to the station?"

"Negative, I am dealing with considerable interference." She paused. "And I see why you are concerned with that. Our target is probably going to harass the others. Perhaps even attack the hangar. Let us beat him to that location, shall we?"

Dala hit her afterburners and tore off, leaving Dennis as if he were standing still. He increased speed, pushing until he started to feel sick. Even then, he was only barely keeping up with her. *At least I'm still on her tail … sort of. We really need to collaborate to get some of this technology in our ships*.

They flew for a good two minutes at the breakneck speed before he received a com message. *We must be close enough for the Gnosis to get us messages again*. Dennis dialed in the signal, working at it until the static dissipated. It sounded like someone was trying to communicate with the various pilots.

"Enemy is in retreat," Commander Bowman said. "This is a general recall for all pilots to return to the Gnosis. Repeat, return to base immediately. Over."

Dennis tapped to reply, "Commander, this is Arden. I'm afraid I'm still in the thick of something. That ship we've been chasing is heading for the station and we're thinking they plan to harass the shuttle. I'll return when it's done."

A brief, static pause sounded before Bowman replied. "Affirmative and understood. Do what you have to do then get back here. We might have to leave in a hurry."

Dennis lost connection to the Gnosis but he spoke to Dala. "Looks like we've got a deadline."

"We always did," Dala replied. "I am closing in but so are they. This will be close. Prepare to fire. Distracting him will be a good idea."

Dennis noted they were within what was considered long range. He

fired a couple beam shots but they didn't come close. He still couldn't get good targeting on the bastard. Dala tried as well but they were both still too far out. The station loomed ahead and the enemy would have a chance to take some shots.

How close is the marine shuttle? Dennis checked the scanner and noted they were already attached to the station. *They'll be inside in a moment but they'll still need a way out.* Dala fired again, this time making the enemy climb, pushing him out of his attack run so he had to climb. It would take him a moment to return to his attack.

But instead of making for another angle, he came straight toward Dennis. *Oh crap!* Dennis hit the top thrusters, dropping down abruptly as a series of energy blasts went over him. Dala screamed by, trying to find a firing solution but the enemy was too swift. He made a quick loop and came at Dennis again, blasting him in the side.

The shields held but something sparked behind him. Navigation gave him an error but he didn't mind as much about that. As long as he still had weapons and some defenses, he'd be fine. Performing a barrel roll, he pulled up sharply and came around, avoiding another attack while putting himself in a better position to retaliate.

They entered a dogfight, veering around one another but it was clear that Dennis couldn't out maneuver his opponent. He needed to distract him, to give his impromptu wingmate a chance to take a shot.

"Pull up hard now!" Dala yelled. "Now!"

Dennis complied immediately, gritting his teeth at the sudden G force. His opponent flew by behind him and Dala swooped in, weapons firing in rapid volleys. As Dennis leveled out, he saw them take the brunt of most of the attacks, tearing through their defenses.

Fire billowed from the enemy's engines in great orange blobs but he still managed to spin and take a shot at Dala. She performed an evasive maneuver but still took the brunt of the attack, sheering off a large chunk of her ship on the side. The enemy exploded even as she began to tumble.

"Dala! Do you have to eject?" She didn't immediately reply and he tried again. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you, human," Dala replied through gritted teeth. I am in

the middle of getting this thing under control. Do not worry. I should not have to abandon this vessel though it will require considerable repairs."
"If you can joke, you must be fine." Dennis relaxed into his seat as she regained control. "Come on, I'll escort you back … The smoke coming out of your side there doesn't look good."
"Thank you." Dala adjusted her course, heading toward the other Pahxin ships.
Dennis couldn't help but feel as if the fight they'd just finished might've been too easy, too simple. Having finished it, only one ship against two did seem ridiculous but the specialization of the technology, the speed and inability to be targeted made it far more dangerous than the rank and file ships they encountered.
"I appreciate your help, Dala. I mean it, I couldn't have done this without you."
"Cooperation is what we are meant to do," Dala replied. "I am simply glad we were able to work together effectively. Perhaps we will see each other again when this is all over with."
"Definitely." Dennis drew a deep breath and continued on in silence. His part of the fight was done, at least for the moment.

***

Christina continued to hold their flank as they made their way through the narrow corridor of the maintenance tunnel. She spoke briefly with the marines and sent her position to them. They committed to meeting them where they might emerge, taking care of any of the Tol'An they came across.
"Backup is here," Christina announced. "Our marines are making their way through the station now and they're going to meet us ASAP."
"Great news," Reach muttered. "How much longer are we going to be in this space?"
Aesthetics mattered to the rest of the station but the maintenance area was filthy by comparison. It was also several degrees hotter. Sweat made Christina's shirt cling to her skin and her hair became a matted

mess plastered to her scalp. The others looked just as miserable, especially the Pahxin ambassador.
His clothes appeared to be heavy and they definitely weren't doing his mobility any favors.
"We're coming up on the panel to get out of here," Lothan said. "Stay close so I can scout the area. I want to ensure we have a safe path to the hangar."
"I'll hold them here," Christina said. *To the best of my ability*. The bodyguards carried heavier weapons than she did but the tunnel was narrow enough that the enemy shouldn't have been able to field more than two people at a time. She felt confident she could handle them for a while and, if necessary, the admiral was itching for a fight too. *The Pahxin ambassador won't be able to assist us*. He was a true VIP that needed protection. If Lothan didn't return, he'd become Christina's responsibility and she needed to ensure he survived at all costs. Having him die in her custody would have tragic repercussions for their burgeoning alliance.
Lothan dislodged a panel in the wall and turned to them. "Be silent now … I will return shortly."
He slipped outside and moved down the hallway, leaving them alone. Christina began to second guess the plan, wondering if they should've simply stayed together. Remaining in the maintenance passage felt foolish. Yes, the tight quarters might nullify the enemy's numbers but a lack of maneuverability went both ways.
"We have to go," Christina said. "We can't wait for Lothan."
"What?" Reach scowled. "I thought we were trusting him with this one."
"We're trapped in here … We need room to move. I think—"
"Greetings," a low voice from behind interrupted Christina and she spun in place, preparing her weapon. A hard blow caught her wrist and her fingers reflexively opened. Her gun bounced off the wall but she didn't even spare it a look, instead throwing a kick at the person who attacked her.
He blocked the blow and they began a brutal melee. Christina threw a punch at the dark figures face, he deflected it and retaliated with a

low kick. She danced back and bumped into the wall, using it to propel herself forward. She connected with his chest and followed with an upper cut.
The attack didn't land before she was shoved back and he clicked his tongue. "You might want to settle down, little human." Christina paused and glanced over her shoulder. Two men held guns on the ambassador and the admiral. "You don't want to lose your precious cargo, do you?"
Christina weighed her options. Would these fanatics kill them anyway? Reports suggested it was a distinct possibility. *Where the hell are you, Lothan?* She cursed under her breath but didn't lower her guard. *Think! There has to be a way out of this!* The admiral grunted as he was poked by one of the guns.
"I think we've lost this round, Major," Reach said. "Better to live through this to fight another day."
If we live. Christina straightened up. Her gut burned. "You win." The two words frustrated her and her face showed it. She scowled as the man gestured in her direction. Another of his men approached.
"Bind their hands and let's get them out of here. I'm impressed by the wily escape attempt but you never had a chance." He patted her on the shoulder. "You'll have the opportunity to understand why soon enough. Bring them. We must get to the ship and leave this forsaken place behind."

***

Heat took point, checking the corridor before dashing out and hurrying toward the conference room where the VIPs were. He passed by dozens of bodies, unarmed people in civilian garb. Some were shot, others cut open and blood soaked into the once nice carpet. Whoever went through there indulged some serious butchery.
"We're coming upon their last known location," Heat said. "You say they're in the maintenance corridors?"
"Yes," Fielding replied. "My HUD's acting up but I think I see a few panels to get in there. Our armor won't fit so we need to figure out

where they're going to come through."
The door to the conference room was little more than debris. Heat and Gorman stepped inside and cleared the room, pausing when they came upon the corpses of the human bodyguards. One had been shot but the other … Someone cut off his arms and his head lulled back, nearly severed.
"Jesus Christ …" Gorman muttered. "Monstrous …"
Heat grunted and looked around. "The fighting here was over fast. There aren't that many scorch marks on the wall. Hardly any missed shots." He noted one Tol'An soldier's body. "They only took one with them, too."
"And the animals left their own behind," Gorman said. "What's next?"
"Find the VIPs," Fielding replied. "Let's head back toward the hangar and see if we can't rendezvous with them. God knows how many more of these fanatics there are out there so stay sharp. I'm guessing we'll be in a firefight sooner than later."
They headed back down the hallway, past where their shuttle was located. Someone shouted up ahead, a loud woman's voice. "Can you hear me?"
"That was definitely English," Anderson said. "Must be one of ours!"
"Double time it!" Fielding ordered. "Spread out, Anderson and Gorman on our flanks. Heat, take my left."
Heat rushed down the hall, their armored boots hammering the floor. As they approached, there wouldn't be any stealth. Whatever fight was about to happen would be inevitable. The trick would be differentiating the friendlies from the enemies. If they were in close quarters, the marines needed to be precise with their shooting.
Rounding a curve, Fielding stopped abruptly. "Contact!" He fired his weapon and Heat moved closer to see what he was shooting at. There was a group of people approaching an airlock leading to another ship. Heat's HUD identified the various targets. Three friendlies and five Tol'An.
He took aim but paused. They were clustering up, forcing the VIPs into the shuttle. Firing their weapons risked hurting the people they were trying to save. "We have to find a way to keep that ship here!"

He shouted, dropping low to clip one of the Tol'An in the leg. His target hit the ground and returned fire but he was rewarded with a head shot from Gorman.
"Gnosis!" Fielding shouted into the com. "Can you lock down the magnetics on the station to keep this ship here? They have the friendlies and are attempting to depart! We need immediate assistance!" Static filled the speakers. "Damn it, they must've lost com again! Gorman, what can you do?"
"Nothing from here!" Gorman replied. "I'd need to be at the control center and even then, this is alien tech. I'm not sure I'd be able to do much on short notice!"
"Let's get on board!" Anderson called. "If we're on there, they can't exactly leave."
"No." Fielding shook his head. The rest of the Tol'An boarded the ship. "They've gotten away. We need them to be disabled out there to take them back."
"We have another problem." The voice came from behind them and the marines spun in place, aiming at him. The Pahxin lifted his arms. "Please, don't shoot! I am Lothan! Bodyguard to the Pahxin ambassador! I'm on your side!"
"Why aren't you with them?" Fielding motioned with his head back toward the airlock which had closed up. "How'd you escape?"
"I was checking the way forward and had no idea that our enemies followed us through the maintenance tunnel." Lothan shook his head. "And while I was away, I found that they have trapped this station with explosives. We must disarm them!"
"Perfect." Fielding sighed. "I hope you know where they are."
"Engineering," Lothan replied. "And I can lead you there."
"We need coms, too." Fielding sighed as they began to move through the station. "Lots of work left to do, gentlemen. Don't slow down because the primary objective went south. We'll get them back. It'll just take a little longer than we anticipated, that's all."

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Chapter 8

Desmond watched the screen as the enemy began to depart. They lost their scout vessels and one of the destroyers. The battleship was quite a ways off, pressed by the three remaining Pahxin ships. The fourth remained behind to contend with heavy damage. As the fighters began returning to the ship, they took stock of their own casualties.

"We're conducting repairs," Salina said, "but the generators took quite the beating. Several crew quarters are not habitable and won't be for a while. One of the medical bays is totally offline and this has put a strain on the remaining space. We have twenty-five wounded and … I'm sorry to say, three dead."

"Thank you," Desmond replied. "Are we able to use the hyperdrive?"

"Chief Engineer Webber stated that we can enter hyperspace if necessary." Salina hesitated before going on. "Sorry, I just got a report from engineering. They've deployed crews throughout the ship and are beginning various repairs. They estimate the generators will be in regular operating condition within half an hour. The rest … will take longer."

Ulian appeared on the screen suddenly enough to startle Desmond out of what he was going to say. "Um … hello."

"Captain," Ulian began. "It seems the ambassadors have been taken. They are in a fast assault shuttle rapidly departing the area. Check your scans as we have sent you the signature."

Salina complied and a smaller screen appeared beside Ulian's head. It showed a blip flying quickly away from the station but it was hard to maintain the readings. *So they were here to kidnap people. What the hell happened to the marines? Looks like we're not done with this mission after all.*

"We'll need to get our people back aboard and pursue," Desmond replied. "Do we know where they are going?"

"Not yet," Ulian said. "But our ambassador has a tracking device." He paused and uttered something that the computer would not translate. "It appears one of our vessels has just shot the escaping vessel. It has

been damaged but not enough to stop it from leaving the system. Perhaps they won't go as far now."
Desmond frowned. "That was risky. Your people could've taken them out."
"Yes, I recognize this. We have another problem, as if the current situation is not trying enough. We have learned there are bombs planted on the space station. Your people are contending with them now. Providing they are swift, we should be able to depart the moment we know where the ambassador has stopped."
"You can track them from so far?" Desmond asked.
"Yes."
Direct, Desmond thought. "Okay, coms must be restored so we'll coordinate with our people on the station, get them back and come with you. Thank you for the heads-up." He watched as the remaining Tol'An ships dropped into hyperspace. *I wonder if we'll be dealing with that battleship after all.*
"You fought well today, captain. Forgive my reluctance and lack of faith. You and your people have proven yourselves capable. Ulian out."
"Er … yay?" Vincent offered. "At least they're impressed?"
"That's something." Desmond stood up. "Let's make sure we focus our repair efforts on defense and departure. Get the marines on coms and help if they need it. Sounds like the bombs aren't too big of a deal or Ulian might've had an expression. Depending on how long we have to wait, we might be in for quite the trip."

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Seven Hours Later

Desmond sat in the briefing room nearly, going through various reports. The Gaelirans issued a formal declaration of their appreciation to both the Gnosis crew and the Pahxin ships for helping with the Tol'An. Gorman and Lothan were able to disarm the bombs and properly dispose of them, so that alone ingratiated them to the

inhabitants.
Admiral Reach's bodyguards were returned to the Gnosis and properly stored so they could be interred back home. The report suggested the marines were pretty unhappy about it, especially considering one of the two men had been badly brutalized. Captain Gabriel committed to having a meeting with them in an effort to calm them down.
Chief Engineer Webber made it clear that the repairs were going well. They were inside safety margins for a hyperspace run. Ulian sent a message along that stated they knew where the Tol'An had stopped and so they'd be leaving soon. The few other small problems they needed to work out could wait until they got home.
Desmond sent a communication request to the Pahxin. He needed to speak to Ulian about their course of action and how they intended to conduct the next part of the operation. When the commander's face appeared on the screen, Desmond dove right in, having learned his counterpart preferred to simply get to the point.
"I'd like a better understanding what the plan is for attacking the Tol'An."
Ulian nodded. "I understand. We will likely find an outpost there, a launching point for terrorist operations. My proposal is we go into the area ready for battle. We will deploy fighters, bombers and soldiers to secure the area and the hostages. My navigator will work with yours so you can arrive much closer to the target."
"Sounds good," Desmond replied. "How soon will we be able to go?"
"When we deliver the coordinates to you and have them fully plotted, we will depart. The Gaelirans have given us their blessing and they are ready to see us gone. They have many dead to put to rest and a station to clean up. We will speak again soon, Captain Bradford. Thank you for reaching out."
The screen went dark and Desmond sat back in his chair, feeling thoughtful. *This next part of the assignment could be the most important. A joint operation like this will see how we truly work together*.
The attack gave them a taste of unity but now they would be on the offense. Depending on what waited for them, they might find themselves in a tough spot. Four ships could probably take a small

outpost but if it was some kind of main base with dozens of defenders, they'd be in for a real mess.
The Tol'An could not be allowed to keep the ambassadors regardless and waiting wasn't an option. The time to strike was upon them and as Desmond prepared himself for the unknown, tension began to build in his neck. Launching into a system without intel may have been required but it did not settle well for him as he considered all the lives about to be at risk.

***

Vincent checked in with the pilots thirty minutes before the ship was supposed to emerge from hyperspace. Engineering crews finished repairing the worst of the damage to the fighters and they were ready to go. The bombers were prepped and loaded. Three shuttles also idled, waiting for the marines to mount up.
Considering they had no idea what to expect, they were as prepared as they could be.
Vincent stopped at Cassie's quarters on his way to the bridge, knocking twice. Once they arrived at the station, they didn't have a chance to speak. Especially when the fighting started. Even when the enemy fled, they went in their own directions. She went to work with Thayne in regards to the signal the Tol'An used to selectively block communications.
The door opened and Cassie peered at him with wide eyes. She wasn't wearing her jacket yet and she buttoned the sleeves of her blouse.
"Hey," she said, "what's up? Am I late?"
Vincent shook his head. "No, I just … I was heading to the bridge and thought you might be on that way too."
"Sure." Cassie grabbed her jacket and pulled it on, securing the buttons. "Let me grab my tablet and I'll be good to go."
They headed out into the hall a moment later, moving toward the elevator at a good clip. Vincent wasn't sure what to say. Platitudes seemed weak and he didn't want to make small talk, especially since he went out of his way to see her. He drew a deep breath and finally

decided anything was better than nothing.
“How’ve you been? Has it been busy?”
“Oh, beyond,” Cassie replied. “We made some headway into researching the weird signal they used to jam our coms. Thayne hadn’t seen it before but it was definitely something from the Orbs. We don’t know how to compensate for it yet but I think we can use a similar method to mute them when we arrive.”
“Great news. I’ve been coordinating the marines and pilots. They’re probably going to be busy.” Vincent smirked. “What’re the chances we show up and that ship is all alone? Wouldn’t that be nice?”
“Impractical.” Cassie returned his grin. “But hey, hope is important, right?”
The elevator arrived and they boarded. “When we get back, I trust you’re going to throw yourself into research?”
“Depends on how fast we have to turn around and leave again,” Cassie replied. “I wouldn’t mind having a day off when we get back there. One that doesn’t involve staying at Gamma Alpha.”
“Seriously. I was wondering about that …” Vincent cleared his throat. “Maybe we could break away for a few hours. Have lunch in the city at least.”
Cassie nodded. “I’d like that. Maybe a commander will have a better chance to get us off the base than I typically do. I swear they think I’m some kind of extension of the Orb, like … property.”
“Your superiors?”
“And Harper,” Cassie replied. “But especially the AIA. When I joined up, I thought it was just an amazing tech job but it consumes you fast. I’d like to say expectations are high but the reality is, they’re exalted.”
“What’s the career path? Politics?”
“Advancement through the AIA, I guess.” Cassie shrugged. “I got a promotion to senior agent when I got the assignment with the Gnosis. I’m not sure where I go from here but I suppose I’ll find out soon enough.”
The doors opened and the conversation ended. Captain Bradford stood at Zach’s station and Salina chatted quietly on the com. Cassie sat at her console and Vincent logged into his own, checking for any new

reports. The marines had boarded the shuttles and the fighter pilots signaled they were ready to go.
Okay, great news. Vincent leaned back in his seat, drawing a deep breath. He took a moment to relax. He might not get another for the next few hours. Considering the lives at stake and what it meant to humanity's plunge into the galactic theater, he felt the pressure resting on their success or failure.
Losing the ambassadors would transcend tragedy and represented a potential rift the two cultures might never mend. The thought should've filled Vincent with despair but instead, he found himself unusually calm. All things considered, worry wouldn't help his performance and the men under his command would certainly feel it.

***

Gizan fought to maintain discipline, to keep to his usual reserved nature. The situation on the station frustrated him. He lost five of his ten men and one of the humans proved to be more dangerous than he anticipated. Coupled with the fact that the ship was damaged on their way out of the system and he felt the mission could not have gone worse.
His navigator made it clear they could not make it back to the main base with their damage and adjusted on the fly. They had several safe planets throughout that region of space so it was just a matter of finding one close enough which could repair their damage. Gizan figured he could either interrogate the prisoners or commandeer another ship to get home.
At least the ships they lost were the ones he considered disposable. Unfortunately, they took several of their people with them. Recruits tended to be easy enough to come by but it would take time to replace them all. The Master might not be pleased with that aspect of what happened but when he had the prisoners in custody, he'd likely forget about it quickly enough.
Gizan wondered about the fallout from attacking the Gaelirans and killing so many of them. If the station blew up, things would be much

more dramatic. Those neutral fools might even decry the Tol'An publicly, which in turn would enhance the organization's credibility. No one would doubt the conviction of Gizan's people again.

The human female proved to be of interest. Gizan wondered why she received such potent combat training. She seemed more capable than the two bodyguards they slaughtered and certainly more dangerous than the average Pahxin soldier. He looked forward to learning everything about her.

Tol'An interrogation methods involved acts which other cultures considered to be criminal in nature. Gizan believed the ends justified the means. If he got the information that he wanted, then he didn't care what he had to do to get it. He couldn't kill them but anything else was fair game.

After all, the Master planned to execute them publicly anyway. If they were battered up a little, perhaps missing a part, it wouldn't matter. They represented conviction more than anything. Humanity and the Pahxin would understand that the Tol'An were to be feared and respected.

"Sir," one of his soldier's interrupted his thoughts. "We have a concern about the human female."

Gizan sighed. "What?"

"We would've had to kill her if she didn't surrender. Would it be better to kill her now? Surely, we only need the ambassadors."

"For all we know, she is the proper ambassador." Gizan shook his head. "No, the only way these prisoners die is if the Master orders it."

"Yes, sir."

Gizan watched the screen as a timer ran down. It showed two and a half hours left before they would emerge from hyperspace. Plenty of time to reclaim his discipline, especially since he needed to send a message to the Master right away. Things were getting back on track. They simply needed a safe place to regroup.

***

Christina sat still beside Admiral Reach, her eyes closed. The metal

bonds used by the Tol'An kept her hands close together, biting into her skin. She remained quiet, listening carefully to the ship noise around her. There were only seven people on board, including five soldiers, their leader and a pilot.

The craft was big enough to have a couple of rooms and the prisoners were kept in one of them but the voices of their captors carried. She listened to them speaking in their language, a mix between panic and unnerving calm. Half an hour into the trip, she labeled them in her head and started to prioritize them should the opportunity emerge to escape.

Hours later, the ship began to shake. Reach nudged her. "Major, are you awake?"

"Yes," Christina replied. "I have been this whole time."

"What was that? Do you know?"

"We've emerged from hyperspace."

"That didn't take long …"

"Seven hours, forty-three minutes," Christina said. "But you're correct, that was fast. Either their engines are more efficient than ours and they can cover greater distances faster or we haven't gone all that far."

"Which would you err on the side of?" Reach grunted. "Damn these cuffs!"

"We took a blow on our way out," Christina replied. "It caused some minor damage but it may have been enough to limit our options of where we could get to."

Reach sat quietly for a moment before speaking again, "I wonder why they haven't tried to interrogate us."

"No facilities." Christina opened her eyes and looked around. "This is a storage closet. They traveled light to grab us and get out. Now, wherever we end up … that's where they'll ask us questions. If they even bother. We're likely more useful as figurehead executions than anything else."

"Cheery thought, Major." Reach sighed. "So when did the AIA put you on me?"

"When I first joined your staff. Once it looked like the hyperspace drive would be successful, we wanted to be close to the military side

of the program. Besides, having me around meant I could at least attempt to keep you safe. Had it not been for Lothan leaving us alone, we would've walked out of that maintenance tunnel."
"Do you think he's in on this?"
Christina shook her head. "No, I genuinely believe he thought he was doing the right thing. It just screwed us, that's all."
"We're not getting out of this … are we?"
"I intend to." Christina turned to him. "What about you?"
Reach's conviction returned, steadying his expression. He nodded once. "I do."
"Then we have to focus on that. There are always opportunities for escape. Believe me, prisoner transfers are never fully secure. Once they try to get us off this ship, we'll see what's possible…and exactly how we're going to get home."

***

Desmond felt his nerves bristle as they emerged from hyperspace. He figured he should've been used to it but each time, he had a moment of concern, however fleeting. The screens came on, showing they'd arrived within thirty-thousand kilometers from the planet—far closer than they would've without the help of the Pahxin navigator.
"Incredible," Zach said. "We hit our target within *fifty* kilometers."
"I've got enemy ships on scan," Salina said. "A destroyer, a scout, and two ships that … I suppose the closest class to them would be the battleship from the previous sector but they have a different configuration. Also, there's a small facility on the planet. Working on number of inhabitants now."
"I'm jamming their communications," Cassie added. "They can't get a message out of the system to ask for help. Turnabout's fair play and all."
Ulian popped on their screen. "Captain Bradford. The ambassador has been taken to the planet's surface. That vessel we pursued was able to land. They have seventy-five individuals down there, not all of which will be combatants but that hardly matters. Our soldiers will have

much work to do when we send them down."
Desmond scowled as he heard the news. "Understood. Our men are ready to go but we're going to need to escort them. That's some real opposition out there."
"Launch immediately. The enemy has yet to field their fighters and there are no ground defenses to take out our ships. When they've deployed, our soldiers will send you coordinates for landing. It's outside the facility but with your armor technology, you should be able to cover the ground quickly enough."
"Thanks," Desmond replied. "We're on it. What about the ships?"
Ulian smiled and it was not a pleasant look. "We destroy them all. Ulian out."
"Still charming," Vincent said as the screen went dark. "He's just not directing that ire at us."
"Disappointed?" Desmond asked.
Vincent shook his head. "Not at all."
"Deploy the shuttles and fighters," Desmond ordered. "Power up the weapons and defenses, Zach and move us into attack position. Time to get the admiral back."

***

Heat gripped his seat as the ship began to bounce. They'd entered the atmosphere but cloud coverage still blocked out details of the surface. Blue sky reminded the gunnery sergeant of home. Even so far from Earth, the look and feel of habitable planets were similar enough to not be a coincidence.
Perhaps that old species really did prepare these places for life, giving us all a chance to thrive.
The placid thought was quickly replaced by the briefing of the mission ahead. They were conducting a joint operation with the Pahxin soldiers to take a small facility. Intel was sparse. Scans gave them the size of the facility but not the internal layout. Some assumptions were made based on basic tactics.
A barracks was expected to be near the front gate. Short walls must've

been erected to keep out wild life because they weren't tall enough to stop an invading force. The Pahxin suggested that the facility likely existed before the Tol'An occupied it, built by settlers long since departed.

They would land half a mile from their target then use their jump packs to get inside the perimeter. The VIP parties should've been easy to spot but they'd likely be in some kind of holding cells. One thing scans did *not* find was the space ship that escaped the station. It had to be somewhere, seeking some kind of repairs.

If they get on board again with the ambassadors, we'll have a real problem.

During the briefing, Fielding told them they were not to attack the ship if it tried to depart. Their allies in orbit would deal with that. If the marines were able to extract their packages, the bombers would come in and annihilate the facility. Heat was responsible for getting the people back to the shuttles and clear of the area.

I'm getting sick of these time crunches. Everything's a rush.

The shuttle broke the cloud coverage and the surface of the planet was revealed. He saw the facility nestled amongst gentle hills and grass. A forest sprawled off for miles in the north and the terrain became rocky on the east and west. Heat noted their landing zone, a clearing with a line of sight all around.

"Landing in two," Fielding announced. "Weapons up and at the ready. We'll be hauling ass the second those doors open."

Heat looked over his HUD, noting all systems were green. The others exchanged looks as the retro thrusters kicked in. The ship bucked wildly as it slowed to a halt, settling onto the ground. Doors dropped a moment later and the marines filed out in a rush, rounding the vessel and heading up toward the facility.

Two Pahxin shuttles landed on either side of them, massive transport class vessels. Dozens of men poured out, their bodies shimmering from personal shields. They wore black uniforms and carried short rifles with tiny scopes on top. Their forces would approach from the flanks while the heavily armored marines would go straight up the middle.

Heat double checked the new addition to his defenses, the short term personal shield the techs came up with while they were away on their

last mission. They weren't sure how long it would last or exactly what it would defend against but he figured he'd kick it on before covering open ground.

One of the men joked about what would happen if the tech backfired. He speculated they might be disintegrated. His comments were enough to put some of the men off of even trying it. "We haven't needed it so far," Anderson said. "I figure they should test this crap better before they strap it on us."

"Don't you remember?" Gorman quipped. "We're the guinea pigs, man. If they need someone to try a weapon or piece of gear, they come to us. Besides, don't be an idiot. There's no way we'll be disintegrated. Blown up, maybe … but even so, the power core ain't big enough for a real explosion. So just relax. It might save your life."

At the end of the day, none of them had a clue what it would be like and their idle, paranoid speculation didn't do the technology any favors. For Heat's part, he intended to trust it. Harper hadn't done them wrong yet and he doubted her work would start just then.

Gorman hit the jump jets and Heat followed suit, rising above the hill so they could see over the walls. Several Tol'An troops were dashing into the courtyard to defy them, preparing their weapons. "We have contact," Gorman called over the com. "Forces are setting up a defensive position. Get ready."

"Be careful with explosives," Fielding said. "I'd rather we do some precision shooting until we know where the prisoners are and how we're going to get them out."

Beams tore through the air, two whizzing by Heat's head so close he should've felt the warmth from the attack. As he landed, he took cover behind a rock. A quick glance showed he could see over the wall. Targets had taken cover within buildings and against the walls of each structure. None of them were totally safe, not from the sheer numbers surrounding them.

Heat took aim and fired, catching his target in the chest. The man's shield might've saved his life but the concussion of the attack knocked him to the ground. Another took his place, firing wildly off to the left, toward one of the Pahxin units. Someone else blew him away, this

time with a head shot.
Gore splattered the wall, proving the personal shield didn't extend to protect the skull.
Gruesome. I'll have to remember that.
Heat stumbled backwards as something hit his shoulder, a blast that didn't quite have the force required to punch through his armor. He dropped low and backed away, trying to see who made the attack. There was too much chaos to pick any one person out and he just kept up his own assault, firing at anything that moved.
The Pahxin blasted away at the area, covering the space with so much beam fire it was hard to see what was going on. Heat and the rest of the marines were able to advance, adding their own weapons to the mix. The Tol'An retaliated but they were unable to handle the overwhelming firepower.
As the joint attack continued, the Pahxin and Humans brought down dozens of Tol'An in moments. Private Kelly called out that he was hit in the arm, a blow solid enough to knock him to the ground. Heat dropped low and crawled over to check on him, but he appeared to be unscathed.
"How'd you pull that off?" Heat asked.
"The personal shield worked!" Kelly cried, crawling to his feet. He started firing into the compound again. "Gotta love that tech!"
Shouts from the left flank indicated the Pahxin weren't coming out completely unscathed but regardless, it became abundantly clear they would quickly secure the outside area. The Tol'An might have reinforcements waiting to engage but they'd have to come outside. When the enemy began to fall back, it looked like they definitely won.
"They're falling back!" Fielding shouted. "Cease fire and take cover!"
Heat wondered why he wouldn't have them press the attack but it occurred to him a moment later that the Tol'An might be trying to draw them into a trap. Not only that, but once they entered the base, the prisoners could have literally been *anywhere* inside and that meant friendly fire became a possibility.
The Pahxin also paused and Fielding went to confer with their commander. Heat had his men crouch, aiming at the opening. If

anyone came out, they'd be done but until then, the marines would hold the area. It wouldn't be long before they'd be dashing inside to finish the foe off and get their people back.

The key now was to be patient, something Heat knew none of the marines were particularly good at.

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Chapter 9

Ulian's three ships moved in to engage the enemy ships and Desmond ordered the Gnosis to form up on their far left flank. He leaned forward in his seat, watching as they approached to conduct the attack. Fighters and bombers raced alongside them, ready to engage at a moment's notice.

Getting in so close to the planet allowed them to deploy the shuttles before the enemy had a chance to repel them. It made the operation considerably easier, at least at the beginning. A brawl between the larger ships shouldn't take too long, especially considering how powerful the Pahxin vessels proved to be.

Massive beams erupted from Ulian's lead ship, connecting with the scout. Shields burst in a moment and bits of the hull burst off in various directions. It returned fire, feebly turning to provide another angle to survive even a few more moments. Another shot caught them from a different Pahxin attacker, this blow enough to end them.

The scout went up so fast, they didn't even see an explosion. It was simply gone.

The rest won't be nearly that easy, Desmond thought. *Especially those big bastards. I guess we should be happy they didn't have an entire armada here.*

"Cassie," Vincent said, "can you detect any sign of the Orbs here?"

"No," Cassie replied. "Nothing on scans at least. If this is their main base and they're hiding them somewhere, they've found a way to mask their signatures … which would be interesting considering. Once those things are on, the power emanating from them is intense."

"The Tol'An has more resources than this," Desmond said. "I guarantee it. Think about terrorist cells. They're difficult to take down because they spread out, put minor resources in many places. Even when there are competing factions doing the same thing, they have a hard time finishing each other off.

"When we take this out, they'll barely feel it." Desmond scowled. "Stopping them from this plan though … that will be a blow they

notice. Zach, target that destroyer and open fire."
"We're at long range, sir," Zach replied. "I'm getting a good lock now …" He paused. "Opening fire."
The ship's deck vibrated in the familiar way as they unleashed on their opponent. It seemed to be focusing on the Pahxin ship but when the first blasts from the Gnosis caught it on the starboard side, it began turning in their direction.
"Looks like we got their attention," Vincent said.
"Damage?" Desmond asked.
"Minor to the shields," Salina replied. "Dropped to eighty-percent. There are fighters … No … they're larger than that … Perhaps bombers? Incoming now."
"Get our ships on them," Desmond said. "Take them out before they get in range. Keep on them, Zach. They're going to retaliate in a second and I'd like to have given them two volleys to their one."
The destroyer got their shots off first, strange blue beams that connected with the Gnosis bow and continued seamlessly for several seconds. Salina called something out but was interrupted by a deafening pop to the left. Desmond's ears rang and he noticed smoke coming from the wall.
As the beam dissipated, Salina shouted, "whatever that was knocked our shields out in the front! We've got a minor hull breach in the crew quarters that were merely damaged before but what's worse … our weapon systems are currently offline."
"Turn us!" Desmond called to Zach. "Show them a side we've got some defenses up. How long before weapon restoration?"
"I'm working with engineering now," Salina said. "I don't have an ETA yet."
"Get us one!" Desmond gestured to Vincent. "Make sure the bombers and fighters know we need some screening. Are shields even up on other parts of the ship?"
"Yes," Salina replied. "Just the bow is currently undefended. The other emitters are holding but I have to warn you, with the front down, the other generators are straining to compensate. I'm going to redirect power until we get that fixed. That will only take me a few

moments. Engineering has just reported they are evaluating the problem now."
"Tell them they don't have much time," Desmond replied. He clenched his fist, considering the next course of action considering the situation. Falling back might be best. If they fired that weapon again, they'd simply tear through another part of their defenses. Still, such a thing must've drained considerable energy. "Cassie, what was that cannon?"
"I'm not sure," Cassie replied, "however, there was a massive energy surge when they fired it…enough so that they seem to have committed quite a bit to making the shot. I don't think they've got the power to do it again soon. We could be in luck. I'm guessing they hoped they would kill us in one go."
Vincent scoffed. "If they would've been patient and took some regular shots first, they might've."
The gravity of his comment wasn't lost on Desmond. "Inform the Pahxin vessels of what we just encountered. If those other ships have such weapons, they'll need to know. For now, give us some distance on this guy and let's see if we can't hold off on another round. Let the smaller ships handle some of the fighting."

***

Admiral Reach strained against the bonds holding him in place to a chair. He sat beside Raeka in an empty cell with metal walls. The door across from them slid to the left and they'd been led there by a couple of fiery soldiers who roughly dragged them down the hallway. Once inside, they were forced into the chairs and cuffed at the wrists then left alone.
Christina was wrong about the prisoner transfer. When the ship landed, it was inside the facility and ten armed guards arrived, aiming their weapons at the prisoners the entire time. They were led through the subterranean hangar and into a set of holding cells where they were deposited separately.
Not even ten minutes passed before Reach and Raeka were taken away, leaving Christina behind in her own cell. *I'm surprised they*

haven't killed her already. They only need us if they want to make a statement. Why hold on to the help? The thought infuriated him but he couldn't help but feel pessimistic.

Several hours of waiting allowed misery to settle in. Reach's back hurt and his stomach growled. Thirst made his throat dry and his head swam. *Are these bastards going to leave us in here to starve to death? What's their game?* He turned to Raeka, clearing his throat to get the man's attention.

"Can you understand me?" Reach asked. "Hello?"

"I understand you," Raeka replied in a soft voice.

"Do you have any idea what they're doing? Why they're holding us like this?"

"The Tol'An wear their prisoners down," Raeka said. "We have not consumed in a long while and they will allow us to continue to suffer under these conditions. They believe it makes a man more pliant when questioned … when pressed for information. We are to be interrogated, make no mistake but they will only do so when they believe we are prepared to talk."

"What could they possibly want from us?" Reach shook his head. "This makes no sense! Do they think they can get military secrets from us? Some kind of security clearance? What will they be after?"

"While I know their methods, their madness is beyond me." Raeka sighed. "It is impossible to say exactly what they will need but I can promise you only that it will not be pleasant. Even if we speak, I sincerely doubt they will treat us with the proper formalities of what prisoners should endure."

Reach was about to ask something else when the door opened and a man stepped in. He wore a black robe, the hood drawn low enough to obscure his face. He approached, standing silently in front of them for a good minute before turning his back on them. There again, he did not move and remained silent.

"What do you want?" Reach asked. "What is going on?"

"Ah," the Tol'An said. His command of the English language was disturbing. "You would like to speak. That is good. I am here to ensure you do. Shall we begin with introductions? My name is Gizan."

Raeka gasped. “Gizan Relik? But … it cannot be so! You were pronounced dead many years ago!”
“It is true, *ambassador*.” Gizan said the word as if it were a curse. “And I have been living my life in defiance of what you have just described ever since. My master has changed but my purpose has not. I will bring order to the galaxy. The Tol’An will prevail and the two of you are in a position to help the cause.”
“We cannot help you!” Raeka shouted. “Your kind, your people … They are nothing more than …” The rest of his statement devolved into Pahxin and Reach couldn’t understand but he got the gist of it. It may have been profanity or just some particularly nasty comments but either way, it made Gizan take note.
The robed man spun in place and slapped Raeka across the face, halting his verbal onslaught. Blood coated the ambassador’s pale cheek and he didn’t
“That is quite enough out of you,” Gizan said in a soft voice. “You should speak in the tongue this man understands. That way he might see what a monster you and your people are. In any event, we will now discuss a few key points about your facilities and how they are set up. I am particularly interested in how humanity defends technology.”
“Well enough to drive you scum off,” Reach replied, scowling up at the man. “Did you read the report about how we knocked out your little invasion force? Then hopped over and took the other Orb from under you?”
Gizan’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, but we were not discussing effectiveness, were we?” He drew a knife from within his robes. “My master tasked me to bring you both back alive though he did not specify unharmed. Continue your defiance and you will meet him not entirely whole.” His body seemed to tremble but a deep breath settled him. “Shall we try again?”
Reach met his gaze and shook his head. “Do your worst, you bastard. I’m not telling you a goddamn thing.”
Gizan stepped in front of Raeka. “Do you share his sentiments? I believe he is a soldier while you’re just a diplomat, a useless tool for

the government. Will you accept pain to avoid answering questions?"
Reach examined his fellow prisoner and didn't like the look of him. His eyes darted about furtively, as if he might explode with anxiety. He strained at his bonds for a moment, hands clenching and loosening before his head dropped and his chin tapped his chest. Terror and physical discomfort must've gotten the better of him.
"What do you want to know?" Raeka asked. "You must understand, I am told little! Please, you know this! You used to work with us, Gizan!"
"Indeed." Gizan stepped forward and lifted Raeka's face, menacing him with the knife. The ambassador began screaming in his own tongue, struggling in vain as the blade slid over his ear. Blood flowed freely, covering his neck as his tormentor stepped back to give him some room.
Raeka gasped and moaned, his shoulders tensed up from the pain. Gizan turned his attention back to Reach. "Do you see what I will do to my own people? They are like me…born of the same planet and species but you … you are little more than an animal. A back world germ allowed to cultivate too long. The things I am willing to do to you will be legend. Tell me what I want to know about your military force!"
Reach opened his mouth to offer up more defiance when an alarm went off overhead. Gizan's eyes widened and his head spun about like an animal cornered in its den. The expression made the admiral smile. "I seem to recall a similar situation for us not too long ago. You're not expecting company?"
"How?" Gizan shouted. "How did they find us!" He grabbed Raeka by the throat. "How! You will tell me now!"
The door opened and a soldier leaned in. Reach couldn't understand what he had to say but he rattled on and on for several moments. When finally he finished, Gizan backed away, aiming the knife at both men. "I will be back for you soon. Do not think you have been given a reprieve. This inconvenience only delays the inevitable. Believe me. You are both doomed."
And he left.

“What did the soldier say?” Reach asked. “What’s going on?”
Raeka struggled to speak, trembling before he finally found his tongue. “He stated they had a problem … that my people have arrived and deployed shuttles. The Tol’An were unable to muster their defenses in time to stop them but they are moving what vessels they have against our potential rescuers. Gizan was called away to guide the men here on the surface.”
“How? How’d they find us?”
“Implanted … tracker …” Raeka coughed several times before continuing. “My people inject them into dignitaries when they do not trust the negotiations.”
“Your government thought we might try to kidnap you?” Reach shook his head. “Thank God for paranoia.”
“In this case, I will not apologize.”
“Nor should you.” Reach grinned and turned away, peering at the floor. *I’m sure you’re out there with them, Desmond. There’s no way you’d let them pull a rescue without the Gnosis. I need to find some patience and wait for the cavalry. Great timing … There’s no other way to say it.*

***

Cassie scanned the surface of the planet, surprised to find that there were no other sentient settlements. There were ruins, like other systems they visited, but no people. The Tol’An lived like rodents in the walls of an abandoned home, unnoticed and forgotten. She wondered how many other worlds they occupied in a similar fashion.
It must be plenty. The AIA has plenty of information on terrorist organizations. These guys are acting exactly the same.
She hoped to find Christina and the Admiral. Two humans among so many Pahxin shouldn’t have been difficult. Unfortunately, their physiology proved too similar to differentiate between them in the compact facility. There were plenty of life forms but the specific ones she cared about were buried amongst them.
Scratch me helping the marines find the friendlies. I guess I’ll focus on the dangerous ship blasting us with those insane weapons.

Thayne provided some feedback, letting her know that they must've used separate generators to power the weapon. None of the other Tol'An equipment showed an increase in their energy efficiency. Shields still operated roughly the same as the Pahxin vessels. That meant an independent source specifically for their new attacks. Which also meant taxing their systems wouldn't necessarily take the weapon out. They could continue firing it long after the rest of the ship was disabled, even life support. Of course, that was contingent upon their power source remaining intact throughout combat. They needed to target it specifically.

Such a power source is likely to cause some serious damage if we take it out, too. Cassie thought. *Like a power core going up*.

She ran a scan over the destroyer, focusing on any energy buildups. As the weapon had to be recharging, she hypothesized that it would be somewhat obvious. Several key areas of the enemy vessel appeared on her screen and after a good twenty seconds, she started to get frustrated. *Maybe they have it shielded against this type of thing*.

But then she found it. A red blob in the middle of their hull, close to the power core itself. In fact, it seemed to be a *second* reactor on the ship. Further data came in, showing her that the strain from the weapon would've drained the ship completely, leaving nothing for *any* system aboard. If they hadn't installed the second source, the weapon would still be a theory.

Cassie related what she found to the captain.

"If we could take out the secondary reactor," Desmond said, "we'd be able to handle the first one and this wouldn't be a problem."

Vincent spoke up, "I can have the bombers give it a go. A couple bombs should take those shields down."

"I'm all for it," Desmond said, "but again, if we can do that, then we don't have to worry about the weapon. Taking the shields down will destroy the whole ship. One thing's for sure, the bombers will have a much easier time evading that thing. Unless Cassie has something to say about their targeting abilities?"

"No, sir," Cassie said. "Only how they power it."

"They're coming in again," Salina said. "Moving toward us."

“Vincent, redirect one of the bomber squadrons right away.” Desmond gestured toward Zach. “I want full speed. Keep us out of their range and draw them back from the fight. With any luck, the Pahxin won’t have to deal with them and can take out the rest of the force. We’ll take the hard one, I guess.”

A brief moment of pressure jostled Cassie in her seat as the ship picked up speed. She glanced at Salina’s screen, swallowing hard at what she saw. The enemy was giving chase and they weren’t slow. She didn’t want to contemplate the stakes of the race they were getting into or the deadly implications of the rising meter representing the opponent’s cannon.

***

Dennis Arden found himself back with his normal squadron, waiting for the chance to get into the action. Tol’An fighters had been deployed but they were brawling with the Pahxin, and dramatically outnumbered to boot. Raptor squadron went after the incoming bombers, Charger provided air support on the planet which left Mustang in reserve.

He wondered if Dala was out there as well. After her ship had been damaged, he figured she might be grounded but perhaps the Pahxin were able to carry plenty of spare. Their vessels were built for war, after all and though the Gnosis certainly came prepared, exploration always was the primary focus.

“Mustang One, this is Commander Bowman, do you copy?”

Dennis cleared his throat before replying. “I copy, what’re our orders, sir?”

“I need your squadron to conduct some concentrated fire against the destroyer. Coordinate your attack runs with Rhino squadron. I’m sure you saw that weapon they fired at us.”

“The beam,” Dennis said. He watched it hit the Gnosis and was surprised when it lingered, continuing to cause damage until the shields visibly cracked. Luckily, Zach was able to get them turned so they couldn’t get another shot off to the undefended portion of the

vessel. “Do we know what it is?”
“We know it has a dedicated power source and they’re charging it up,” Vincent said. “We’re also pretty sure they won’t be able to target something so small as the fighters and bombers. That’s why you’re getting your shot on it.”
“Won’t this attract the attention of the enemy fighters?”
“Maybe, but we don’t have a lot of choice. Besides, their smaller ships are pretty busy fighting with the Pahxin. You should have plenty of time to cause some trouble…even if it’s just a distraction, we need some space to breathe if we hope to win that brawl.”
“Understood. Rhino One, did you catch that?”
Nolan Coplan led the bomber squadron and he piped in. “Affirmative, but we’re en route to the surface for our attack run. I’m sure we’re not all needed for that. Do you want me to divide the forces to support Mustang?”
Vincent answered, “yes, make that happen and keep a tight report cadence. I want to provide frequent updates to the captain, especially as we’re trying to contend with that weapon. Good luck, men.”
Dennis drew a deep breath before engaging his thrusters. “I think you guys heard that,” he said to the rest of his team. “Follow on my lead. Alicia, you especially. I want us coming at it from multiple angles to avoid their defenses as much as possible but be sure you’re coordinating your shots. When the shields are weak, the bombers will hit them.”
“Their shields should be way too much for us,” Lieutenant Kate Zeller spoke up. “We need Raptor in here … maybe Charger.”
“Charger’s providing air support on the planet,” Dennis said. “And Raptor’s screening for the Gnosis. We’ve got a lot of firepower in six ships. Remember, we’re trying to strain their power, not take it down completely.”
Nolan added, “we’ll time our bombs to make the most of draining their power too. You weaken them, we’ll do the rest.”
“There you go,” Dennis replied. Scans came back, showing three sets of turrets on the bottom and top of the ship. They had good coverage but there was a small blind spot in the front, rear and sides. He tapped

his computer, drawing out an attack vector for the other pilots that minimized their time in the path of the enemy's defenses. "Follow those directions and we should be golden."

***

Squadron Leader Dimitri Gerrit received a promotion to lead Raptor squadron after his predecessor died on their first mission. Since then, there weren't many opportunities to hone his command skills. He'd participated in their last mission but they were primarily backup, with only a little dogfighting.

This time out, they were in the thick of it back at the space station and his team was assigned to take on the bombers rapidly approaching the Gnosis. He took the lead, getting his people into a wide vanguard formation. The blips on their scans were large, roughly one and a half times the size of their own ships.

They had a good three minutes to kill before the enemies would be in range to shoot and Dimitri used the time to his advantage, trying to gather all the data he could on his targets. The computer suggested their maneuvering thrusters were not powerful enough to allow them flexible mobility but they had tough shields and thick armor.

It's going to take a few shots to bring them down.

Five bombers in total approached and six fighters raced to meet them. Time to target for the Tol'An was six minutes. Raptor had a tight window to finish them off before they could deploy their payloads and potentially destroy the Gnosis completely. Considering what the initial beam weapon did, the danger was very real.

The bombers housed defensive turrets and what the scans indicated might be countermeasures. This limited the use of missiles, at least initially. Depending on how they used their defenses, the bombers might not be able to fend off a large barrage. Dimitri's gut warned him that he had no idea what to expect from their opponents though.

Their countermeasures might scramble the friend or foe circuitry. Our own people have been working on a similar technology. Probably best to stick to beams and guns until we know more.

Flight Lieutenant Dylan Ball acted as his second. He'd also received a field promotion and proved to be a reliable member of the team. The two men maintained a private channel and it flashed on the HUD when they had less than ninety seconds before they could attack. Dimitri clicked over, letting out a sigh.

"Now's not really the time, is it? We're practically on top of them."

"I know," Dylan replied, "but I want to take two of the others and break from formation. We'll loop around and hit them from the flank. They don't seem all that maneuverable. We just have to coordinate it so we don't get caught up in friendly fire."

"Okay," Dimitri agreed. "Angle your attack. We'll be going head on and then climb. Relate it to the team and let's make it happen." He switched back to the open channel and Dylan gave them the plan. A moment later, Raptor Two, four and six banked hard to the right and hit their afterburners, rocketing away.

We're the distraction, Dimitri thought. *Gotta love being in charge*.

The bombers began firing their turrets, total blind shots as if they were merely hoping for a hit. Dimitri forced himself to remain calm and fly steady. The chances of being hit at that range were negligible. Even if a stray shot found a mark, shields would absorb it. Only a missile would be cause for actual concern.

Lieutenant Marge Kingston, Raptor Three, spoke up on the com. "That's a lot of turret fire, sir. Recommend we dive and come at them from the bottom."

The bombers might be able to angle to continue shooting at them but the suggestion was still sound. It would put their opponents in a tough spot, especially with the other three ships on the verge of flanking them. *We just have to buy another few moments*. Dimitri approved the course change and the three ships dipped, dropping below the turret coverage.

"Go ahead and use your beam weapons," Dimitri said. "Let's throw some fire back their way and see how they like it." They had twenty seconds before they'd pass under the bombers. This changed the plan with the way they'd interact with their companions, only the fact they'd be diving instead of climbing.

Dimitri made the change clear to Dylan half a moment before pulling the trigger. Purple light cut through the darkness between them, splashing against the hardened defenses of the first bomber. *I can't believe I hit. I didn't even use my targeting computer.* The lucky shot had a positive effect as his opponent tried to climb, a reflexive twitch. As the enemy altered course, he took himself away from his formation. His buddies must've had nerves of steel as they continued lumbering on as if they didn't even notice Raptor's presence.

Dimitri passed under the bombers in an instant, moving so swiftly the enemy was little more than a blur overhead. Dylan called their attack as he and his two fighters opened up, using beams and guns to lay into their targets.

If the enemy didn't care about Raptor before, they certainly did after that. Two of the five ships spun, giving their little squad more turret coverage. The one that broke formation took the majority of the hits from Dylan's attack run and Dimitri's computer showed that they waylaid the ship's shields, bringing it down below twenty percent.

As Dimitri's trio came around, they focused their fire on the straggler, tearing into him. In the ten seconds it would take to pass him by, they pounded him with a near constant state of beam weapons with a few shots from their guns thrown in. The bomber tried to maneuver away, spinning slowly as it dove but he just didn't have the maneuverability. Sparks licked the hull and a moment later, it went up in a great plume of blue-gold light.

"Scratch one," Dimitri said. He turned his attention briefly to the scanner to see if any of the other targets experienced a significant amount of damage. That tiny distraction, that short moment his attention was diverted, something shook his ship, jarring him so hard his teeth chattered and his jaw ached.

Spinning to the right, Dimitri dove to avoid another blast from whatever hit him. Scans indicated one of the turrets caught him. Shields held at fifty percent. *Wow, those hit harder than I anticipated!* It dawned on him that their defensive weapons would have to be tough if they hoped to get close enough to deploy their ordnance.

I bet these are stolen military vessels. Dimitri clicked over to Dylan.

“How bad did your pass hurt them? With one down, we’ve only got three and a half minutes before they can lob a bomb at the Gnosis.”
“Two of them took a pretty nasty bump,” Dylan said. “Only one came away completely unscathed and he’s in the middle. Now that they’ve given themselves more coverage, he’ll be tough to nudge out of there.”
Marge butted in, “we can lob our missiles in and go for proximity charges. Detonate before they make contact.”
“Good call.” Dimitri looped around. “Fall in on me and we’ll see what we can pull off. Dylan, you stick to guns and beams the rest of us will try Marge’s plan.”
The ships formed up loosely, giving themselves some space to maneuver in the event that more turret fire came their way. As they rapidly approached their targets, they found they’d easily overrun them if they weren’t careful. Each ship launched two missiles, the heat coronas from the projectiles winking as they hurtled away.
Dylan performed a series of rapid shots, spraying the area in front of them with as wide a range as he could without altering course significantly. His attack was more about harassing their enemy, while giving the missiles a chance to arrive.
Two of the projectiles were taken down by turret fire but the other eight arrived unscathed. Dimitri gave the order to detonate and tiny explosions erupted around the bombers. The force of the blows caused the two on the ends to be shoved away from the center, dislodging them from their tight formation.
The unscathed ship dove, scans showing his shields took a bit of splash damage but he came away clean again. His companion didn’t fare so well as two of the missiles blew right beside him. Shields dropped, shattering visibly with a burst of red sparks. “Focus on him!” Dimitri called, letting his computer grab a lock before firing. Concentrated shots tore the bomber to shreds, leaving behind chunks of debris.
Flying Officer Carson Bright, Raptor Six, called an SOS, drawing Dimitri’s attention. The young pilot took several blows from one of the turrets, knocking his shields out and bringing his engines offline. “I’m ejecting!” Carson shouted. “Ejecting!”

The life pod burst from his vessel and sailed off into space. Dylan broke formation and attacked the offending bomber. He took his target at the flank, banking just enough to avoid a series of shots from the defensive turret and hammering his opponent with guns.

Hull damage caused the bomber to spin to the left and the engines shut off. It might not have been destroyed but it seemed dead in space, drifting away from the action. *That's three down*. Dimitri thought. *Two to go, including one that isn't even hurt*.

The chronometer showed they had less than a minute to distract the bombers before they could attack the Gnosis. One was already on full defensive and trying to fend off the fighters so he wouldn't be a problem but the lucky one, the guy who hadn't even taken a direct hit, continued plodding along.

"Raptors three, four and five," Dimitri said, "you're on the harried one. Finish him off. Dylan and I are going to take the other guy before he gets any closer. We have to wrap this up, folks. Don't dally. A mistake right now means a lot more than some hurt feelings, believe me."

Dimitri directed his course, coming in behind his target. The ship's turret spun and started firing at him, causing him to drop lower to avoid the thing. Dylan came alongside him, dropping a few feet. This gave them a good angle on their target's engines and bottom, two sections which should have had the weakest shield presence.

"I want concentrated fire," Dimitri said. "It's the only way we're going to put this guy in the ground quickly enough to save the Gnosis."

"I'm ready," Dylan said. "Got lock. In three … two …"

Before they could get to one, the enemy bomber fired his payload, deploying six bombs in rapid succession. Dimitri pulled the trigger, unleashing hell on the ship and scored a direct hit. Dylan's attack helped whittle the enemy's defenses down and less than a few seconds later, they rendered him to burning embers.

"Shit!" Dimitri grunted. "Gnosis, this is Raptor One, we have a big problem. You have six bombs incoming. We are moving to intercept right now." He checked his scans and noted his people finished off the last of their targets. "Raptor, form up and help me take care of those

projectiles. We've got even less time now so hurry! We're seriously at zero hour here."

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Chapter 10

Christina leaned against the wall of her cell near the door, peering through the bars. They left her there alone, having taken the ambassador and admiral away a long time before. It gave her a chance to think in private, to examine the situation and figure out what to do next. The situation, dire as it seemed, had not taken all hope from her yet.

The Tol'An didn't bother with cameras, or if they did, they were well hidden. Their little prison was mostly crafted out of stone and concrete with metal bars and wooden planks for benches. There were no bathroom facilities in the area and they didn't bother to bring food or water.

Why bother to take care of people if you're just going to execute them. The thought made Christina scowl. Did the terrorists plan to kill them in some public way? Did they want to broadcast it back to the two governments as a way of establishing their credentials as complete psychopaths? She was pretty sure no one would've argued with them before this stunt.

Now we know for sure, I guess.

Christina wondered if they were trying to interrogate the other prisoners or merely torturing them. Either was a possibility but she didn't know what they could possibly be asking for. The Tol'An weren't about to invade anyone's space. They weren't going to Earth with an armada, at least not yet and the Pahxin seemed capable of repelling them on that front.

What was left? Did they want to find a way to infiltrate the society's through intrigue? That made some sense. But even so, what did they hope to achieve from Reach? All they needed to get into Earth's society was a safe place to land and a solid understanding of some language on the planet.

The Pahxin might even be easier to break into considering they used to be part of that society.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter what they want. We just have to get out of

here. Christina considered her options. Escape would require a weapon and a method of getting off the planet as soon as possible. When they broke atmosphere and descended to the surface, she saw there was nothing for miles around.

Running for it would practically be suicide. If they didn't find a vehicle in the facility, leaving would be the same as waiting to be killed. No, she needed a ship and the only one she was certain of was the assault craft they were kidnapped on. *I'm pretty sure I can fly it well enough to get off this rock but what then?*

They saw defensive ships orbiting the planet. Getting away would entail weathering an assault by them, plotting a hyperspace course and initiating FTL all in short order. None of which she'd ever done before. Christina understood the theory but putting it in practice under stress was a very different situation.

We have to try. Maybe the Pahxin ambassador can help.

Christina considered her next move and came up with something. It might be a long shot, depending on why they grabbed the ambassadors, but she figured there was no harm in trying. Dropping to her knees, she started shouting for help, putting on a show of misery and despair.

"Please! Just let me talk to someone! I'll tell them anything they want to know! I'm with the admiral all the time! Please … I can't take the isolation anymore!"

Not the best performance, but it'll have to do. Christina kept it up, even going so far as to fake weeping. *At least the Tol'An don't know what true human misery is or they might see through this in a hurry*.

It took nearly five minutes of freaking out before one of the guards burst in and hurried over to her. He barked several strange words in her direction, speaking in his own language. Christina looked up at him through water eyes, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you … I just … I can help your boss … I need to get out of this cell. I'll do anything!"

The Tol'An grunted and crouched in front of her, leaning close. She felt her muscles tense, prepared for action but she maintained her cool. *Come on, put your face right next to the bars, buddy. You're so damn*

close!

"I'm ready to talk …" Christina tilted her head, holding his gaze with her eyes. He began to speak again and that's when she struck, lashing out to wrap her fingers around the back of his neck and yanking his face against the cool metal of the cage.

His mouth opened in shock and she drove the fingers of her free hand into his solar plexus. A gasp took him instead of a scream and drew back, hammering him once in the throat. He choked and started to collapse but she kept him close, rifling his pockets until she found the key. Next, she relieved him of his rifle and unlocked the door.

Christina stepped out of the cell and crouched beside the guard. She took hold of his head and wrenched to the left, straining until his neck snapped. Pocketing his keys, she searched the body and found a tablet. Grabbing that and his weapon, she hurried to the door open door.

She leaned to look out when an alarm went off, driving her back.

Are you serious? They must have cameras after all! Damn it! Christina aimed the gun and waited for the soldiers to come in but they didn't arrive. Instead, she heard people shouting and running *away* from her position. *Maybe I'm wrong about what's going on. Finally, a little luck for a change.*

Glancing outside, she saw soldiers rounding a corner, running away from her. They headed up a flight of stairs and disappeared. Shouts continued long after she couldn't see them. The muffled sounds of shuttle engines burst from outside followed by gunfire. A battle began and it was happening on the surface.

This might solve how we're going to get out of here, depending on who arrived. Christina drew a deep breath and departed the holding area, moving to the right toward the first corridor. *Time to find the admiral and get out of here. I only hope the attackers out there are on* our *side.*

***

Admiral Reach strained at his bonds, testing to see if he might be able to escape. Gunfire burst from above, muffled by the depths of the base

but it was still quite apparent. He figured it would be better to attempt to meet their people rather than simply wait for them to arrive. If at all possible, getting away would help the rescue effort.
“There’s no reason for that,” Raeka said. “Stay still and be glad that we are rescued.”
“I won’t count on that until our soldiers are in this room,” Reach said. Even then, he wasn’t quite ready to give in to total optimism. He’d been involved in enough military operations to understand the risks inherent in them. Anything could happen, good or bad. Despite the overwhelming numbers, stray bullets didn’t differentiate targets.
Gizan burst back into the room, eyes like a wild animal. He looked at the two of them, sneering. “I suppose it would be on *you* then,” he said, pointing at Raeka. “It would be just like our government to put something in your body. I should have thought of it. I could’ve prevented this. I am truly a fool.”
“This battle is over for you,” Raeka replied. “Please … surrender, Gizan. Help us put an end to Tol’An aggression. Be one with your people again. This is your only option.”
“I have many options left, filth.” Gizan advanced and punched Raeka in the gut, making the man wheeze. “But the first of them will be to get the admiral here to my ship. Pity about you though. I do not have time to cut you open and find where the tracker is so you will simply have to die here and now.”
Gizan drew the knife he’d used on Raeka earlier and drew it back, prepared to plunge it into the man’s chest. Raeka cried out, shouting in his own language. Reach struggled so violently his wrists ached and began to bleed.
Just then the door burst open and Gizan stumbled back before he could land his blow. He spun, staring down the barrel of a Tol’An rifle held by Christina. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said. “That looked like a pretty intimate moment. Would you mind stepping aside before I blow your damn head off?”
“Kill him!” Reach shouted. “Shoot this sick bastard!”
“No problem,” Christina said. Her finger twitched as Gizan lashed out, knocking the weapon to the side. The weapon discharged, the beam

splashing harmlessly into the wall.
Gizan followed up with another blow to the weapon and Christina lost her grip, blocking another blow meant for her face. He stabbed at her with the knife but she caught him by the wrist, slamming her knee into his gut. A grunt of pain racked his throat and he stumbled back, giving them both a chance to square off.
Christina lifted her hands defensively, stepping to the left until she stood between Gizan and the prisoners. He lowered his center of gravity, holding his hands out to either side. She threw a feint to the left and he bought it, lifting his arm to block. Before he could recover, she kicked him in the gut, driving him back against the wall.
Before Gizan could move, Christina hopped forward and pummeled his face and chest with a series of swift punches. He tried to slash her with the knife and cut her shirt just below the ribs.
Gizan overcommitted to the attack and half spun in the effort. Christina booted his elbow, disarming him of the knife, then followed up with another kick to the back. The blow knocked him to the floor and he scrambled away, climbing to his feet with a savage snarl. Christina backed away, as if to give herself some space to size up the situation. Gizan jumped at her, grabbing her about the waist and lifting her off the ground. She clasped her hands and slammed them down on his back three times before they hit the wall. His grip loosened and she shoved him away.
A punch to his face made him scream and he returned the blow, catching her on the cheek. This time, Christina dropped to the floor and she rolled over on her back.
“Come on, Major!” Reach shouted. “Don’t let this Tol’An trash take you!”
Christina scooted away as Gizan advanced. He wrung his hands into fists as he approached, smiling wickedly. “I will eat your heart, human. Devour your very essence and leave you to rot here on this miserable world. You have failed.”
Gizan lunged forward and Christina bent her knees, catching him with her feet. Shouting with the effort, she shoved him away and he stumbled backward into the wall. Reclaiming her feet, Christina

advanced and kicked him in the groin then followed up with another blow to his face. Gizan lurched away and grabbed the door before slipping through.
“Did he just run?” Reach shouted. “That bastard is fleeing!”
“I’m not going after him,” Christina said, grabbing the rifle from the ground. She aimed at the door as she moved close to the chairs, drawing a set of keys out. “Let’s see if one of these will unlock those cuffs.”
Reach struggled a bit as he impatiently waited for her to free him. “Good work, by the way. I can’t believe you escaped.”
“I told you it just required some patience.” Christina paused as one of the keys worked. She handed them to him. “Please free yourself the rest of the way, I’m going to guard the door until we’re ready to get out of here.”
“Do you know what’s going on out there?” Reach asked, scrambling to get the other binding off.
“I came immediately to find you, so no.” Christina manned the door and peered out. “Whatever happened it gave us the chance to get out of here though so I’m not going to look it in the mouth.”
“Good plan.” Reach stood and moved over to Raeka. “Come on, pal. I’m not leaving without you.”
“Thank you …” Raeka nearly sobbed as the bonds came free. “Both of you, thank you.”
They joined Christina at the door. “We’re ready to move.”
“Okay …” Christina hummed. “I’m trying to decide the best course of action. I’m not in the mood for friendly fire, that’s for sure.”
Reach noted that her face was swelling up and she was bleeding from the knife cut to the chest. “Are you going to be okay, Major?”
“Believe it or not, I’ve had worse times.” Christina offered a grin. “Follow me, gentlemen. I’ll do my best to get us out of here. Let’s just hope whoever came along isn’t particularly trigger happy. This will be a real short escape attempt if so.”

***

Desmond stood as the destroyer closed the distance between them. The Gnosis was moving at full speed and still the enemy was gaining on them. Zach fired but they didn't even try to avoid the attacks, instead soaking them with their defenses as they moved in for what would undoubtedly be the kill.

"Their weapon seems to be powered up," Cassie said. "It's ready to fire again."

"Remember," Salina said, "they get two shots with their weapon before it has to recharge. We cannot take them head on. The shields are too low and the generators can't handle it. Advise we show them our aft."

"Do it," Desmond said. "Hurry, Zach. Redirect all weapon power to the engines. Buy us distance and give the fighters time to do their work."

"Report from Raptor," Vincent sighed. "It's not good. The bombers were able to deploy a payload on us. Our people are trying to shoot them down before they get here."

"Great … Will our turrets be able to help with those bombs?"

"I'm on it," Salina said. "I'm going to have to leave them some power though. They'd be part of redirecting from weapons."

"Keep them online and do whatever's necessary to protect us against those bombs."

Zach got them spun so that the destroyer was looking at their rear. The weapon fired again, cutting through their shields as before. The attack splashed on one of the engines, making the entire ship rattle violently. The ship lurched and they seemed to stop. An eerie silence fell over the bridge before all systems kicked back on.

"Report!" Desmond called. "What happened?"

"One of our engines is offline," Salina said. "Shields are down."

"I've got no maneuverability," Zach added. "Helm seems to be offline."

Vincent turned to his console and spoke harshly into the microphone, giving the pilots an update on their situation. He made it clear that the pilots were responsible for keeping them alive. The notion might've been a lot of pressure but he was ultimately right. If they

weren't able to harass that destroyer or take out those bombs, the Gnosis was done for.
The next few minutes and a bunch of fighters stood between them and oblivion.

***

Gizan made his way from the holding cell and down the hall. The fight with the human did not go at all as he intended. He had no idea they could be so formidable or well trained. Especially a woman. Why would they bother to give them such education? He underestimated her and paid the price for it.
I am lucky to be alive. The shame would rest on him for some time but he did not have time to wallow in his failure. He needed to escape the facility before the Pahxin and human forces took it over completely and he was captured. His incarceration or execution would be a huge blow to the Tol'An.
Several soldiers huddled near the stairs leading to the entrance. He stopped when he realized they were without a commander. "What are you men doing down here?" There must've been over two dozen of them, perhaps more. They were crammed into the rooms and corridors, looking uncertain and afraid.
"We are unsure of how to proceed." One in the front said. "The enemy has surrounded the base."
"Then drive them back!" Gizan shouted. "Get up there and slaughter every one of them to the man! This is *our* facility and you will *not* allow it to fall to filth! Go! Bring glory to the Tol'An!"
The speech wasn't exactly his most rousing but it had the desired effect. He lit a fire under them and the men charged up the stairs, their guns leading the way. Any moment, they would enter another firefight and this time, it would distract the enemy long enough for Gizan to slip away.
I hope they repaired the ship enough for my departure. Gizan ran down the hall toward the underground hangar. He not only had to contend with departing the planet but he needed to set a course that would get

him well away from the forces surrounding the system. *They will likely be too busy with our defenders to give chase*.

Two men waited near his ship as he emerged and they stood at attention when he arrived. “Get aboard,” he ordered. “We must flee here immediately and tell the master what happened. This facility is lost but we may still have victory if our lives are preserved.”

They powered up the engines and started off through the cave that would take them out of the area and some miles from the base. By the time their enemies knew where they went, they’d be long gone. *A quick trip to orbit then we will hop to the next system and finally home. I will have much to answer for but not to these bastards.*

Gizan leaned back in his seat and glared out the cockpit as they headed toward the bright, sunlit exit. He drew a deep breath and prepared himself for the trials to come. *The master may judge me. Only him. All the rest will simply forget my name … which is all the better for the Tol’An cause.*

***

Dennis watched the timer on his HUD countdown backward from six. The destroyer just unleashed fury upon the Gnosis and seemed to cause considerable damage to the engines. Mustang squadron needed to up their attack and drive the destroyer back if they wanted to have a home to return to.

The timer hit zero. He pulled the trigger, his energy beams striking the enemy shield the same time as several others. Scans showed the shields were definitely weakened, especially since the target chose to take the direct hit from the Gnosis. They would have two full volleys before having to reposition for another run.

Their target’s shields needed to drop down to at least sixty percent to make the bomber run worthwhile. Anything greater might be little more than a nuisance.

Turret fire tried to dissuade them, and one shot came close enough to Dennis to sizzle his shields. Still, they had found an ideal space to fly in, allowing them to avoid the majority of the defensive blasts. A

second timer went down, this time from three. At zero, Dennis was only a thousand kilometers away.
He fired again and pulled up, banking away from the enemy and hitting his afterburners.
“Nolan,” Dennis spoke into the com, “are we good? What’re the shields at?”
“I hate to tell you this,” Nolan replied, “you’re going to have to make another run. You only got them down to seventy-eight percent. It’s climbing back but if you’re quick, you should have it.”
Dennis sighed. “We’re on it. You heard him, guys. Line up for a second attack run on my mark.”
He set the timer even faster than before, a countdown from three for the first attack. The others formed up and they sped toward the destroyer, through considerable turret fire since they didn’t have the chance to line up their attack as carefully. The timer hit zero and Dennis fired, his blasts striking the shields again.
On his second attack, he let loose two missiles at the very end and climbed. As the projectiles found their mark, he was nearly two thousand kilometers away, just out of range from the turrets.
“Damn it,” Shane said. “I got tagged back there pretty bad. Shields are down in the rear.”
“Are you still maneuverable?” Dennis asked.
“Yeah, but I can’t take another one of those.”
“If we have to go back in,” Alicia spoke up, “I can hit it a few times. I can make it out of there.”
“Shouldn’t be necessary,” Dennis said through gritted teeth. “Nolan, please tell me you guys are able to get in there now.”
“They’re at fifty-eight percent this time,” Nolan replied. “We’re deploying bombs now!” Twelve bombs in total were fired and they rocketed forward two at a time. Each successive hit would batter the moderately weakened shields and hopefully, take them down significantly enough to end the fight.
Dennis glanced over his shoulder to witness the first two hit. They crashed against the shields and lit up brightly, turning the entire area white. Before the light even faded, the next two hit and the next. By

the third couple projectiles, orange flames joined the white. The Destroyer turned but it was too late to avoid the damage.
The enemy ship didn't explode but it was no longer chasing the Gnosis. As it drifted off, sparks erupted around the damaged hull. The rest of the bombs found their mark, further amplifying the destruction. Pieces of the vessel cracked off and were launched into deep space. Scans showed the ship's power was currently disabled.
"Mustang One to Gnosis," Dennis called out. "Do you read? The destroyer seems to be down."
"Good job," Vincent said. "Fall back and do what you can to assist Raptor squadron. They're chasing down some bombs that are incoming. We're not out of this yet."
Just when I thought we'd have a chance to relax for a second. "Roger that, Gnosis. We're en route." Dennis adjusted course and gunned the throttle. "You know what this means, folks. Frying pans … fires … We have to find a way to keep ourselves out of both and still get home alive. Throttle up and move out."

***

Heat stared intently at the door, itching to get into the base and find their VIPs. The lieutenant was hanging around near the Pahxin commander, talking it out. Maybe they had a way of scanning the area to get a layout but it didn't feel like they had time. Somewhere in that place was a spaceship and that meant another way out.
They could be flanking us right now for all we know. Heat looked at Gorman. "What do you think?"
"I think we're sitting on our asses when we should be pounding dirt."
Heat brought Fielding up on his com. "Sir, permission to—"
Before he could finish his statement, a group of screaming men burst forth from the doorway into the facility. They began firing as soon as they stepped outside, firing wildly in all directions. Some took cover and others charged as if they didn't care what happened to them but even the computer was having a hard time putting their numbers on the screen.

Christ! Heat dropped lower to use the wall for better cover and fired his weapon, taking shots at anyone he could connect with. His HUD flashed a warning as an explosive flew by his head. A grenade landed less than five feet behind them. “Hop!” He shouted. “Frag! Go! Go! Go!”

The marines hit their jump packs just as the grenade went off. The concussion of the attack caught Heat from behind and sent him hurtling into the ground in the midst of several of the enemies. They opened up on him just as he initiated his personal shield. The first two shots were absorbed but the others struck his armor, causing the HUD to go red with a warning.

He hit the thrusters again but they didn’t work. Dashing forward, he put his shoulder in front of him and slammed into the nearest soldier. The man was lifted off the ground and carried until Heat slammed into a wall, busting through the concrete into the room itself. This bought him some cover.

His shoulders ached and a point in his back had a sharp pain. The armor indicated there were some serious points of damage and the power assistance threatened to seize up. He kept his weapon aimed on the hole he’d made and backed into the corner so he could watch the door. Gorman’s voice echoed in his helmet and he finally had a chance to acknowledge it.

“I’m alive, but I’m not sure how long I can count on that,” Heat replied. “Armor got seriously hosed in that attack. You okay?”

“We’re fine … Stay put. We’re coming to get you.”

A man burst in through the door and took a shot, narrowly missing Heat’s head and connecting with his shoulder instead. Heat returned fire, catching the target in the stomach and face, spraying blood everywhere. He crouched, waiting for another attack which came almost instantly.

Firing again, he killed three more before he knew he needed to get out of that position. *If they come at me through the door and the hole, I’m done. I can’t defend it with my armor in this state anyway.*

“I’ve gotta get out of here, guys,” Heat said. “If you’re coming, you need to hurry. Otherwise, I’m going through that hole and taking my

chances."
"You're an impatient ass," Gorman said. "I'm at the door to the house now. We're locking the perimeter."
Heat moved over to the hole in the wall and peaked out. The Pahxin had engaged and were storming the facility. Gunfire filled the air, mostly energy blasts that seemed to sizzle as they passed by. More than once, he was nearly caught in the face and he pulled back just as something connected with the wall beside him, sending chunks of debris over him.
Another shot caught Heat in the left arm and he spun into the room, taking cover again. "It's insane out there!"
"That's why we're securing the perimeter," Gorman said. "Hang tight and keep your head down. Something stirred these guys up and they're not playing around anymore."
Heat listened to the fighting, waiting for it to subside but it wasn't slowing down. His HUD showed there were still plenty of enemy targets out there and they were really pushing hard. Several Pahxin suffered in the attack and the com traffic indicated they were nursing quite a few wounded.
His armor indicated he'd been hit too, a crack to the side of his back that was going to take some work from the doctor. The hit he took to the left shoulder might've dislocated it but it had already gone numb so he didn't notice. As he took stock of his situation, he heard a noise from the other room.
"Friendlies incoming!" Gorman shouted. "Do not fire, Heat! I swear to God, I'll smack you!"
"It's about damn time," Heat replied. "How're we doing this?"
"The Pahxin are almost done." Gorman turned and fired. "We need to get into the facility. Can you move?"
"Well enough." Heat didn't genuinely believe it but he wasn't going to sit back while the others went without him. "Lead the way."
Heat followed Gorman through the door into a space with no walls and a partially caved in ceiling. He didn't remember hearing any explosives go off but that was the only way the place could've been so devastated. Outside, four of their marines held the area, rapid firing in

every direction.
Tol'An bodies littered the area and the moment Heat stepped outside, Gorman waved his arm for everyone to follow him. They dashed for the facility, blasting their way through a small squad of six before they arrived at the door and headed down a flight of stairs. Vine's personal shield took a hit but kept him safe.
Those things aren't useless after all. Wish they worked a little longer. I wouldn't be so messed up.
Gorman held up his arm for them to stop and he paced into the hallway, aiming his weapon. "Who goes there?" He shouted. "You're coming on some highly armed marines so if you can understand me, you'd better speak up!"
"Hold your fire," a woman's voice called back. "This is Major Dawson. I've got the ambassador and admiral with me now!"
"Any more guys down here?" Gorman asked.
"Not that we saw on our way out. Do you have a way out of here?"
"Soon as we mop up the forces up there, we sure do." Gorman turned to Heat. "I guess we found our VIPs."
"Seems they were more capable than we thought," Heat replied. "We have to get them back to the shuttle. Now that we know where they are, we can get some air support in here and strafe those bastards."
"Gorman to Fielding, we have the VIPs and are ready to come out. What is the situation, over?"
Gunfire turned sporadic and they heard only a few shots as opposed to the constant barrage of a few moments before. It lasted another twenty seconds before the lieutenant responded. "Enemy has ceased fire. We need to clear the area, get to the evac and let the bombers finish this place off. Come on out."
"We're clear," Gorman said to the others. Major Dawson, Admiral Reach and the Pahxin ambassador approached.
"Glad to see you, boys," Reach said. "I didn't know if you'd make it but I had a feeling Captain Bradford wouldn't let us down."
"Glad to be here, sir," Heat said, gesturing for them to come forward. He scanned them for injuries and noted that the ambassador required medical attention but the others were only a little battered. They'd be

fine. He spoke into his com, “we’re going to need medical personnel standing by when we return to the ship.”
“Everyone okay?” Gorman asked.
Heat nodded. “We need to get out of here.”
“Wait!” Christina stepped forward. “If you’ve secured the area, we can’t go without grabbing some intel. This place could be a gold mine.”
“We’re about to level it with bombers,” Gorman said. “We don’t really have time.”
“Call them off,” Christina replied, turning to Reach. “Sir, surely you agree. We have to find a computer terminal at the very least and see what we can pull. This sad tablet I grabbed won’t offer much insight.”
Reach seemed to think about it for several moments before nodding. “Alright, the major is right. Let’s get what we can from this place. There’s no reason to waste an opportunity like this. Tell he bombers to hold off. This shouldn’t take long.”
Heat held back an urge to sigh and turned away, reaching out to Fielding. “Lieutenant, the VIPs are secure. I need you to let the bombers know we require another few minutes. The admiral would like to gather some intel from this facility before we depart. Please advise.”
“Sounds good,” Fielding came back. “We’ve secured the courtyard so you should have a few minutes but don’t take long. We have no idea how long it will be before the Tol’An send reinforcements.”
“Understood.” Heat drew a breath and gestured down the hall. “I’ll escort you while we make this happen. Gorman, take the Pahxin ambassador up to his people for some aid. This shouldn’t take long.”

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Chapter 11

Dimitri figured the bombs wouldn't be all that difficult to destroy. The challenge came from their speed but they moved in a straight line, driving toward their destination. With any luck, when one exploded, it would take others with it. He figured the bomber only deployed the payload out of desperation.

Lining up with the heat corona of his target, Dimitri engaged the targeting computer. It failed to get tone immediately, which surprised him. He was at medium range and there was no reason it should've been a struggle to lock on.

"Are any of you having trouble with your computers?" Dimitri asked. "I can't seem to get tone."

"Same," Dylan replied. "There's some kind of field surrounding them. Looks like we have to eyeball the shots."

Dimitri engaged a reticle, lifting his nose to lead the target a little. He fired and the beams seemed to be on target. The bomb climbed at the last second, avoiding the attack. *Are you kidding!?* "Did you see that?"

"Let's escalate things," Dylan said. His ship pulled away from the others, moving closer to the projectiles. He opened up with guns. The shots hammered one of the bombs, even as it also attempted an evasive maneuver. A bright spot near the engine lit up and the casing shattered, sending debris in all directions. "That's one … but holy crap, they're quick!"

"If they detonate, we can't be so close to them," Marge added. "I'm going after them from the flank. Maybe I can strafe them and do some real damage."

She banked to the left and headed off and Raptor Four, Jerry Graff, followed.

Dimitri climbed, noting they had less than four minutes before the bombs reached their target. Five remained and if all of them were allowed to hit, they would certainly cause enough damage to destroy the ship. After the most recent attack by the destroyer, the Gnosis was in no shape to take additional shots.

“Need a hand?” Dennis Arden tapped into their com channel. “Looks like you’re having some challenges taking down some bombs.”
“They’ve got evasive capabilities,” Dimitri said, firing his weapons. Again, the bomb danced away but he continued after it, chasing the thing as if he were in a dogfight with it. “Do you see this?”
“We can help,” Dennis replied. “If we lay down enough concentrated fire, that should be sufficient to take them out. We’re coming in hot. Watch your scans.”
“I’ve got an idea,” Flying Officer Alicia Quinn piped in. “Permission to break formation?”
“Granted,” Dennis replied. “But keep it within some realm of safety, huh?”
Dimitri knew Alicia well enough but he didn’t know she was such a daredevil. After their last couple missions, her name became a byword for reckless but daring flying. If she had a plan, he could definitely assume it would be wild but whether it proved effective or not remained to be seen.
Another of the bombs went up as Marge caught it on the side with guns, tearing through the fuselage and knocking it out.
Maybe they’re not responding to the guns the way they do the beam weapons. That would make some sense and give us a slight advantage.
Dimitri relayed his epiphany to the others. “Try to switch to mass drivers as your primary attack. Let’s see if they don’t bother to evade.”
“Hold on,” Alicia said. “Don’t shoot at all for a second. I’m trying my plan.”
With four left, Alicia flew in front of the bombs, firing her beam weapons at the one on the end. It climbed and she spun in place, firing again. It tried to evade and collided with another bomb, detonating when they made contact. The resulting explosion took both out and Alicia righted herself, climbing to rejoin the others. “Two left.”
“That was ridiculous.” Dimitri muttered, firing his cannons. The bomb didn’t move nearly as much as it had when they used beam weapons but he still narrowly missed. “Everyone, just lay into them together!”
They had less than a minute left. The Gnosis loomed head of them,

easily large enough to block out the distance beyond it. Every fighter, eleven in all, fired their cannons at the same time, laying down a wide field of fire. The bombs wriggled and tried to evade but there was simply too much ordnance for them to avoid.

They were torn apart, tumbling away. Dimitri slumped in his chair, feeling a sense of relief wash over him.

"Watch it!" Dennis shouted. "I'm reading unstable mass … The warhead's intact!"

Dimitri climbed suddenly, pulling up hard and hitting the thrusters. An explosion behind him made the ship shake violently and he struggled to maintain control. Thrusters on all sides kicked in, forcing the ship to remain straight. Alerts burst in his ears, crying out that the engines had taken significant damage.

"Everyone okay?" Dimitri called. "Did anyone get caught in that blast?"

Each Raptor and Mustang sounded off but two reported heavy damage. They needed to get back aboard the Gnosis to have their problems looked at but as Dimitri looked over the hull of their home, he realized they might be in more trouble than he anticipated. The damage looked extensive and potentially crippling.

Dear God … Can we recover from all that? Time to find out.

"Return to base, everyone," Dimitri said. "Our part in this fight is over."

***

Desmond gazed at the screen, giving his crew some time to catch up on the emergency repairs. The two remaining Pahxin ships brawled with the larger Tol'An vessels, blasting away with beams easily the size of some of the medium ships in the Earth defense fleet. As the enemy retaliated, the scene inspired awe, especially with the eerie silence of the chaos.

And we're sitting ducks all the way out here. Desmond sighed. *I want to get in there.*

Scans indicated there was tremendous amounts of debris in the

makeshift battlefield, turning that area of space into a hazard for regular travel. Pahxin fighters overwhelmed the Tol'An resistance as tiny flashes provided some sense of the wild dogfighting. The battle seemed on the verge of conclusion but it wasn't over quite yet.

One of the two Tol'An capital ships took three shots straight to the hull. Their shields must've dropped and when the attack took them, electricity and fire poured out of several holes. Each engine produced a blue glow and the middle of the vessel expanded then burst, essentially cutting the ship in half.

The other turned, engaging engines while attempting to flee. They were immediately pursued and the Pahxin concentrated their fire, chipping away at what remained of the target's defenses. It couldn't stand up under the barrage and the thrusters went dark a moment later as it began to drift.

Desmond's com chimed and he tapped the screen to bring it on speaker. "Go ahead."

"Captain, it's Webber. I've finished the damage assessment. Of the two primary engines, only one of them will require repair. As a result, I've restored the helm so we should be able to move again."

"How fast can you get the engine back online?" Desmond asked. He wondered how long they'd be stuck in that system, especially since the place was hostile territory. The Tol'An might respond when they lost connection to their outpost and if the Gnosis remained in a weakened state, they wouldn't be able to defend themselves.

"Half an hour at most … That's just to get us moving again. When we get home, we'll be busy for a while." Webber sighed. "Shield generators were burned out so we're replacing the circuitry. They're internals are all modular, meaning it won't take long. We've almost got them back up. Some of the emitters will also have to be replaced. A couple melted completely."

"Understood." Desmond smirked before he asked his next question. "What about weapons? Hyperdrive?"

"Surprisingly, our arms are still ready to go. If you need them, you've got them." Webber spoke to someone else for a moment before returning. "Hyperdrive remained unscathed. Sorry, something's

requiring my immediate attention. I'll report back with some progress ASAP. Webber out."
Desmond turned to Salina. "How are our casualties?"
"Eight dead so far," Salina replied. "Many wounded but I'm receiving reports that the med bay has stabilized the worst of the injuries."
"Vincent, are we getting any word back from the pilots?"
"Most of them have returned to base," Vincent replied. "The bombers have just finished leveling the facility. The marines are on their way back. They report they have the admiral and his aide. The Pahxin ambassador has gone back with his people. Com chatter suggests that the Tol'An have been routed and are fleeing the battle … though I have no idea where they're going."
"Ulian has hailed us," Salina said.
"Put him on the screen." Desmond stood when the commander's face appeared. "I understand you've taken care of your side of the battle."
"We have. I would like to commend you on handling that destroyer. The technology aboard, so I'm told, was something we had not seen before. Very powerful. Good work. I am sorry that your ship received such damage from it. We would like to send a repair crew to assist with preparing you for hyperspace."
"Thank you, we accept." Desmond clasped his hands behind his back. "You seemed to make out fairly well."
Ulian waved his hand. "Conventional weapons. They did not have the advantages of your foe. Nevertheless, yes, they were tough but not insurmountable. I will leave two ships here to mop up and come to you personally for the assistance. Stand by."
The screen went dark and Desmond sat back down, fending off the stress that settled on the back of his neck. They may have succeeded at their task but the cost was high. Several crew dead, equipment damaged…it was the worst battering they suffered since beginning their forays into space.
I suppose we'd been fairly lucky until now. I underestimated the Tol'An before but I shouldn't have. The Pahxin would've wiped them out by now if they weren't formidable. It won't happen again.
"Captain," Salina said, "I'm picking up a large ship leaving the planet's

surface. It's not one of ours." She paused. "It's the one that left the station! I'm sure of it!"
Desmond scowled. "Where's it going?"
"I …" Salina stopped suddenly. "It's coming this way!"
"Are the shields back?" Vincent asked. "Or at least some of them?"
"Yes, sir," Zach answered. "I've brought them online for the starboard and aft sides."
Desmond nodded. "Turn us so he has to face the defended side and get the weapons ready. If he's really going to attack us, we can give this bastard a special thank you for leading us here."
"Um," Cassie said, "permission to put something on screen?"
"Go ahead," Desmond replied.
Cassie tapped at her computer for a moment and a tactical view of the area came up. "I did a scan on that incoming ship. They're powering up their hyperdrive but that looks like an attack run to me."
Desmond watched the screen for a moment and sure enough, the ship was coming straight for them. Perhaps they planned to offer up a parting shot before dashing away. *I wonder if we can disable that arrogant ass before he escapes*. "Zach, lock weapons on target and fire a full volley."
"Yes, sir." Zach performed a quick set of swipes on his console. The lights dimmed low when he fired but came back quickly enough. He switched the screen to straight visual. "Direct hit!"
The enemy's shields brightened even as it launched a projectile and veered away. It seemed to have maneuverability more akin to a fighter than they would've expected given the size. Smoke bloused out from the top of it just a moment before it winked into hyperspace and disappeared.
"Damn it!" Desmond clenched his fist. "I can't believe he pulled that off. What's that projectile it deployed?"
"Some kind of missile …" Zach frowned. "The warhead seems … Wow, suggest we pull away as quickly as possible."
"Are the shuttles back on board yet?" Desmond asked. "Everyone from the surface?"
"Negative," Vincent said. "The admiral's ship has yet to take off and

his fighter cover is still above the planet's surface. The bombers haven't finished off the facility yet either."
"What're they waiting for?" Desmond shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Get us away from that thing and target it. We're not taking more proximity damage from these guys."
The ship lurched as Zach engaged the engines and they pulled away, slow at first but the speed picked up. Ulian came on the screen, face contorted in concern. "What has happened? I did not expect you to move."
Desmond filled him in on what was happening and had Salina send the scan data about the missile. The readings made the Pahxin commander frown and he turned away, shouting in his own language. When he finally looked back at the camera, he straightened his shoulders before speaking again.
"We have seen this type of tactic with the Tol'An before. Those weapons are deadly to smaller ships and can cripple larger ones. While the destructive power is nothing to sneer at, they produce a field which disables computer systems. Those include life support."
"What do we do about it?" Desmond asked.
"Do *not* shoot it." Ulian's eyes narrowed. "Do you have tractor beams?"
Desmond shook his head. The concept was known to them and their scientists were working on prototypes but they had yet to be implemented. Grabbing something with energy sounded useful but ultimately, it wasn't the thing to focus on while trying to go beyond the borders of their solar system.
"I'm afraid not."
"Then we will be there soon. We can contain the explosion with ours …" Ulian paused, as if considering his words carefully. "You will still want to continue moving away from the attack though. Just in case."
"You heard him, Zach," Desmond said. "Give us as much speed as you can muster. Oh look…Webber's calling with a complaint about this, I'm sure." He brought the engineer on the line. "I don't have time at the moment. I'll get back to you soon. We're … essentially racing for our lives up here."

“Understood … just …” Webber grunted. “Try to take it easy? A little?”
“No promises.” Desmond clicked off the com and sat back in his chair. He turned to his own computer, checking the proximity between the Pahxin ship and theirs. The ETA was less than a minute but it felt like an eternity. The missile kept pace with them, even gaining slightly. An estimate showed it would hit them in less than two and a half minutes.
Sweat broke on his brow. *This is far closer than I’d like to admit*. He felt the tension on the bridge. Every one of them understood the danger barreling down on them, the helplessness of fleeing. One more brush with death, another threat with heavy ramifications. Once they left the Gaeliran space station, they found themselves hounded by misfortune.
“Twenty seconds to impact,” Zach said. “I’ve got her at full speed but it’s not enough!”
Desmond gripped his seat as the Pahxin ship approached. A red, translucent beam burst from their bow, nearly hitting the Gnosis. Desmond turned to his computer and noted they caught it less than three hundred yards from impact. His eyes widened for just a moment before he regained his command cool.
“Keep moving, Zach,” Desmond spoke softly. “Give us a little more room.”
That was way too close. He thought as the missile detonated harmlessly within the tractor beam. *Which pretty much sums up this entire mission*.
“Thank you, Ulian,” Desmond spoke without turning on the com. “Slow us down, Zach and let Webber have some time to fix the ship up. I think we’ve had enough excitement for this shift.”
“Admiral’s ship is finally taking off,” Vincent said. “They gathered intel from the facility and the bombers are about to take care of the rest.”
“Sounds good.” Desmond rubbed his eyes. “Salina, coordinate with the Pahxin to get some repair crews over here. I’d like us to be hyperspace ready by the end of this shift if at all possible. The longer we linger here, the better chance we’ll meet up with more Tol’An, especially

since one of them escaped. I think you all have something to do so let's move out."

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Epilogue

Christina sat in the shuttle, willing her muscles to relax as they lumbered back to the Gnosis. Admiral Reach seemed to be asleep, leaning his head against the metal panel of the wall. She needed to speak with him, not only about what they encountered but her allegiance to the AIA.

ETA to the ship showed twenty more minutes so if she wanted relative privacy, she needed to talk right away. The marines were busy talking amongst themselves and they were far enough away that if Christina kept her voice down, they wouldn't hear. *Might as well get this over with before we have an audience.*

She nudged him with her elbow and he started awake, glaring at her. "Are we almost there?"

"Yeah," Christina replied, "about twenty minutes out. I'd like to talk to you about events on the station … and who I work for."

Reach lifted his brows. "Yes? You want to talk about the fact the AIA planted an agent with my staff?"

Christina nodded. "I'm hoping we can keep this on the down-low. It won't do anyone any good to bring it to light. I can retire from the position … make it a clean but discreet break."

Reach sighed, turning away. "I'm not sure that suits me. If Dulain owes me a favor for example …" He paused. "However, there is the matter that you risked your life for us … multiple times. You could've played the role of an aide to the end. There's something to be said about that."

"What're you thinking then?"

"Maybe there's a good reason for you to stick close."

Christina narrowed her eyes. "I won't be able to tell you anything about AIA activities."

Reach shrugged. "No … but I think we could reveal what happened here to Dulain and maybe work together instead of … whatever this was about. I suggest we talk to him and see what we can do."

Christina looked out the window and sighed. Dulain would *not* be

particularly pleased but considering the situation, she didn't have much of a choice. Maybe she shouldn't have told him who she was, it simply proved the fastest way to get him to listen to her back on the station.

I'm paying for it now. "Okay," Christina agreed. "We'll talk to him. But please … don't tell Captain Bradford. We'll keep this to ourselves, deal?"

"Indeed, Major." Reach smirked. "And you can tell me more about how you got this rank … and who you really are … later."

"Yes, sir." Christina sat back in her seat, her muscles just as tense as when she tried to calm down minutes before. "Thank you for your discretion."

"And thank you for everything you did." Reach gripped her arm tightly, meeting her gaze as she turned to him. "You very likely saved my life. I won't forget it … believe me."

Christina finally smiled. In the end, despite the factions playing against one another and everything that happened, they were two human beings who managed to survive the worst possible conditions. While her infiltration of his inner circle may have been discovered, she would have rather had to deal with that than the chance he could've died on the station.

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Desmond wanted to meet Admiral Reach in the hangar as soon as he returned but duty kept him busy. They weren't able to hook up until two hours later, after the Pahxin repair crews were in place to help Webber prep the Gnosis for the return trip home. He had Cassie meet with them ahead of time to look over the intel they got from the station.

He figured putting an AIA agent on the task would be the best bet and she got Thayne involved right away. Her report was interesting enough that he planned to bring some of it up in his quick conversation. While the Tol'An base they found was not a large one, it did provide them with the coordinates to several military targets.

Desmond went to the admiral's quarters and knocked, entering when summoned. The older man sat on the bed, dressed in loose fitting trousers and a white shirt.

"Forgive my appearance," Reach said. "The doctors assigned me to some bed rest for the trip home. It was an order I didn't feel up to arguing about."

"I understand." Desmond nodded. "I'm glad to see you alive and unscathed."

"Thanks for coming for me." Reach leaned forward. "I had no doubts … but thank you. That madman … He would've murdered us. If not in that base, then wherever he planned to take us."

"Good Lord." Desmond clenched his fist. "I'm glad we got here in time. The intel you brought back paid off. We located several other bolt holes the Tol'An set up shop. We've even got the coordinates for a manufacturing plant where they've been producing their weapons."

"Do we know where they're keeping the Orbs?"

Desmond frowned. "I'm afraid not. We're guessing that's their main base. It's unlikely any of these smaller bases will lead there. And unfortunately, we weren't able to take any prisoners. One ship escaped … The one they took you out on from the station."

"Then the man who was interrogating us must've survived." Reach cursed. "I had some hope…maybe his own people will take care of him for failing."

"It's possible," Desmond said. "They're a special kind of crazy."

"Ship looked pretty damaged on our approach." Reach stood up and stretched. "Will we be able to get home?"

"Yes, the Pahxin helped with the repairs and they've certified the hyperdrive. You'll have plenty of time to rest before we get back too."

"Good. Before that, I have to speak with their ambassador." Reach turned to the desk and clicked on his tablet. "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"No, sir. I'm good. Just wanted to check in and let you know how we're doing."

Reach clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm glad to be back and believe me, if anyone doubts what you guys are doing out here … If the

council decides to be critical, I'll be there for you. I've got your back, Desmond. Thank you. For everything you've done on this mission … thank you."

"Of course." Desmond smiled. "I'm just glad you're okay. We'll talk again before we get back. Until then, good luck with the ambassador though after what you guys went through together, I doubt you'll need it."

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Marooned: Legacy War Book 4

A Ship in Crisis

While on a mission to deny their enemies a powerful artifact, the Gnosis is dragged to the surface of an alien world in a remote corner of the galaxy. As they evaluate their damage and attempt to discover what has happened, they discover they are not alone.

Other ships have been stranded in the same way and their crews are desperate to escape. They converge on the Gnosis, ready to claim her as their own. The only hope seems to lie in an ancient facility built by the former inhabitants of the planet. With overwhelming odds and little to go on, the human crew must struggle to survive against the possibility they may be grounded for the rest of their lives.

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Prologue

Red emergency lights burst on overhead as the alarm blared throughout the ship. Captain Desmond Bradford gripped his chair tightly as the ship rattled and shook, jarred by an unseen force holding them fast. He turned his attention to Lieutenant Deacon Neville, the current pilot operating the helm of the Gnosis.

The young man's hands flew over the controls. He maintained his composure despite the dire situation and, considering their predicament, Desmond couldn't have been more proud of him. Though the thought certainly felt out of place given what they were going through. Traumatic moments tended to produce odd reactions.

"That thing is holding tight," Lieutenant Salina Gold said. She sounded like they were casually flying through space. Desmond hadn't seen the event that could shake her, not entirely. "Full thrust has not budged us even a meter. In fact, we might want to throttle back as the engines are beginning to overheat."

"Are they holding us here?" Desmond asked.

"I …" Salina paused. "I cannot answer that. It may be true, yes, but if we can't break free, then I'm not sure we'd be able to defy it either."

"Throttle down," Desmond ordered.

"Yes, sir." Deacon didn't sound as if he agreed with the order but he tapped the controls, his hand trembling just before he completed the process. Instantly, the ship lurched forward, bucking as it careened toward the surface of the third planet in the system.

Desmond nearly toppled from his chair as they entered the atmosphere. "Full shields!" He yelled. "Make sure they stay on, Deacon!"

"We're going to make landfall in less than two minutes!" Salina called. "We might need to use the thrusters as I was clearly wrong about holding us up there."

Desmond kept his mouth shut about that part but turned to Deacon. "Fire the retro rockets and slow our descent the best you can. I'd recommend you do it in increments but make it quick! You don't have

a lot of time.”
Deacon obliged and the ship trembled every time he hit his controls. Salina called out how it was doing, letting them know that the descent had slowed, albeit barely. She gave them a countdown before they would hit the ground and by the time she got to a thousand feet, Desmond really wished she’d just stop.
I’m not sure anyone on the bridge wants to know the exact moment we’re possibly going to die. The last thing we’ll hear is twenty feet and be gone.
Deacon smacked his console hard and held his fingers in place, discharging the retrorockets in a continuous burst. Moments before they made landfall, Salina called out something about how their velocity seemed to be within an acceptable safety margin but whatever that meant didn’t matter when the crash came.
An earsplitting groan erupted as the lights flashed out. Someone shouted and Desmond bumped his head on his chair hard enough to dazzle him. He looked around, feeling drunk and ill at the same time. His blurry vision made it impossible to see any details and he mercifully collapsed to the ground, consciousness fading fast …

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Chapter 1

Voices seemed to drift to Desmond from the ether, echoing as if they came from a gymnasium with high cement ceilings and a polished wooden floor. Their words blended together as if oversaturated by the reverb in the air. When he focused, he realized he'd been talking to Admiral Garlan Reach.

"We found a gold mine with all that Tol'An intel," Reach said. "We understand many of their plans and know where they're hiding some of their most valuable assets."

"Are we going to hit them?" Desmond asked. He felt confused for a moment by the conversation but didn't seem to show it. Not while talking to the admiral. "I don't know how we'd be entirely effective with military action if we only have one ship. And the sister vessel to the Gnosis isn't even remotely done."

"No, but close. We have the Pahxin ships here to help and provide a little more security. That certainly helps." Reach sighed. "No, we've discussed another idea for the Gnosis. Something that you have proven to be far more effective at."

"What's that?"

"Infiltration. Smaller targets will be perfect for us to send you in, grab an item and get out. Your forces should be more than adequate for the next assignment, in fact. We're tracking several key items that the Tol'An are interested in procuring. One of them is on another seemingly dead planet."

Desmond groaned. "Those aren't proving to be dead, sir. Each one we've visited has proven to have a bunch of crap left behind, most of it malfunctioning and dangerous. We've lost more men to those automated defenses than we have to actual combat. I'm exaggerating but not by much."

"I understand but in the grand scheme of usefulness, I need you and your people to be out there taking care of something. They placed a particular importance on this planet so that's why you're getting it. Don't worry though, you'll have some Pahxin backup should you need

it. Commander Ulian Hataran has agreed to be on standby."
Desmond liked the sound of that. Ulian proved to be an efficient officer and a hard core soldier. He started out rough around the edges in regards to their partnership but once the Gnosis proved itself, he came around. If that guy was going to be available, then there wasn't much to worry about.
"When will I get the intel on the planet?" Desmond asked. "And the action plan? I need to make the arrangements with the crew and check on our repairs after that last battle. We don't want to hop into this kind of unknown and have anything on the verge of breaking down on us."
"Of course." Reach nodded and tapped his computer. "I've sent you the soft copy of everything you need. Brief your people, gather what you need and get moving. I'm sure you'll find some serious action out there but I have every confidence that you can handle it."
The scene faded and blackness replaced it. Desmond tried to sit up but his whole body ached, forcing him to remain still. Silence pressed at his ears but then something began to whine off to his left, building up until it reached a crescendo and remained steady. A bright light replaced the darkness.
"Captain?" A voice echoed in his ears and Desmond had to focus to understand it. Glancing up, he saw Commander Vincent Bowman hovering over him. "Can you hear me?"
Desmond nodded but didn't respond.
"I think he's okay," Vincent said. "At least nothing's broken. Where the hell are the medics?"
"Overwhelmed," Salina replied. "I've upped the priority and they'll be on their way soon. I'm reaching out to engineering. We need scans back online right away."
"Weapons would be nice," Deacon called out. "Just in case."
Vincent started to say something but Desmond faded out again, losing track of what they were saying. He found himself standing beside Doctor Harper in the laboratory, looking over a star chart generated from the Orb. The information on the screen blurred and he turned away, listening to her.

“We took the intelligence you received from the Tol’An and cross-referenced it with the Orb. That allowed us to bring up this star chart … which is quite detailed. Now that we can put some of these in perspective to our current location, they’re proving to be useful. We’ll probably still need to do some physical visits to fill in the gaps, but this is a great start.”

“I agree,” Desmond replied. “And these numbers are safe? We’ve checked them?”

“Well …” Harper sighed. “We did the best we could. Salina and Lieutenant Commander Caplan went over them and seemed confident. I’m not worried about the coordinates though, I’m worried about what you’re going to find. Many of the worlds we’ve researched through the Orb have some history … a little data to talk about what they used to be like.”

“This one doesn’t?”

Harper shook her head. “I’m afraid not. The second Orb we have might be able to help but we’ve only scratched the surface of what’s in there. It’s going to be a while before we see anything real out of that device.”

“I see.” Desmond hummed, turning to the screen. It was painful to look at and the blur worsened until he found himself waking suddenly back on the bridge. Doctor Jason Holland crouched beside him, pressing his hand against his shoulder to keep him in place, holding him down.

“Just rest easy,” Jason said. “You’re fine but you don’t want to hop up right away.”

“What happened?” Desmond asked.

“You got jostled about but there’s no concussion and no broken bones. If you give yourself a second, you should be able to get back to things.”

“I need … a report. Vincent?”

Vincent stepped forward. “Here, sir.”

“Give me a status update.”

“Um …” Vincent looked at Jason who shrugged. “We’re grounded right now, sir. The ship has been brought down to the planet’s surface

and according to Salina, we're still being held in place. We're gearing up the marines to run a scouting mission and engineering is working to bring all systems back online."
"How bad is the damage?"
"We were very lucky," Vincent explained. "Deacon hit the rockets and slowed our descent. The shields also helped. That's not to say we didn't come away unscathed … We've got a lot of work to do but it's achievable and we'll be able to leave this place when we're done."
"So right now, we couldn't launch?"
Vincent shook his head. "Even if we didn't have that beam holding us in place, we'd be stuck here until we bring the engines back online and several other key systems. Even life support is malfunctioning at the moment but luckily, the planet's atmosphere supports human life."
"Is Thayne okay? Cassie?"
"They're fine, sir, and trying to ascertain what's holding us here."
"Perfect." Desmond hoisted himself up and sat in his chair with a groan. "Jason, do you have anything for this headache?"
"I thought you might ask," Jason muttered. He pressed a hypo against his neck and it hissed a moment later. A cool sensation floated through his body, instantly alleviating the pain.
"Why didn't you do that before?"
"Because I wanted to sneak as much rest out of you as I could," Jason replied. "I have other patients to attend to now, but if you need me, come down to the medical bay."
"Thanks." Desmond rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his head. The objective of visiting the planet involved denying the Tol'An some kind of item. The others performed some analysis of it while they were in hyperspace. He needed to gather their report and see what they discovered. It might hold the key to what happened to them. "Repair ETA?"
"Engineering has the scans back up," Salina said. "I'm trying to restore the interface so that matters. It'll be another ten minutes at most. I have to replace some parts in here … and a few others require tweaks. If you saw this mess …"
"Thanks," Desmond interrupted. "I'll believe you." He glanced over

and saw both Deacon and Zach at the piloting station. They were discussing something, looking down at the lit screen. “What’re you two doing? Why’s the ship not tilted?”
Deacon replied, “I managed to get the landing gear down and righted us at the last second. I half didn’t think they’d deploy considering I’m not sure we’ve used them before.”
“As far as what we’re doing,” Zach said, “when we first arrived in this system, our computer updated our start charts with current data. Right now, we’re checking the other planets for signs of life and technology. Maybe we can figure out what’s holding us here and if it might be coming from another planet entirely.”
“Thank you.” Desmond rubbed his head again. “And good job, Deacon. Very impressive. I’m going to get some water and be back in a moment. Vincent, gather a full systems report while I’m gone and prepare to give me an overview of what we need to do and how we’re prioritizing our efforts.”
“I’d like to understand what systems are in the worst shape and which ones can be restored swiftly.”
“I’m on it, sir.” Vincent nodded, grabbing his tablet.
Desmond stepped over to the elevator and paused. “This is working?”
“Yes, sir.” Salina replied. “Basic systems were restored while you were napping.”
The deadpan delivery of her comment annoyed him but Desmond just sighed and let it go. He boarded and hit the button to go to his quarters. A quick refresher and a drink should get him back to mostly normal, he thought. The next few hours would be a scramble, especially once they had all the data they needed to make some decisions.
And then we determine how screwed we are and whether we’re ever getting off this rock.

***

Agent Cassie Alexander stumbled to her feet, holding a nearby console tightly to avoid falling over. The tech bay was in shambles, wires

sticking out of the ceiling and sparks dancing from torn panels, the twisted metal covering bulging where they absorbed some internal concussion blast.

Wow … Cassie blinked away the blur in her vision and scanned the area for Doctor Thayne Rindala, their Pahxin scientist. He was lying on his stomach near the door. A chair was resting on his legs and he didn't seem to be moving. Considering the state of the room, she wasn't surprised but panic still compelled her forward.

She stumbled along, shoving aside debris in her quest to reach him and when she arrived, she dropped to her knees. Pressing her fingers against his neck, she forced herself to calm down and breathed a sigh of relief when she found a pulse. Thank God. Crawling to the wall, she stretched to reach the communicator above her and tapped it.

"This is the tech lab," Cassie said, a sense of nausea gripping her stomach. She slumped, slurring her words. "Need … medical assistance … Thayne … and me … I …" Pain overwhelmed her. Voices piped through the speaker but she couldn't make them out. Consciousness faded but she didn't quite pass out.

The sounds of people speaking above her brought her back to a meeting before they left Earth, a quick gathering with Christina Dawson and Beaumont Dulain. They wanted to speak before the Gnosis left the system, another chat with the Applied Intelligence Association. She remembered not looking forward to the briefing, especially after what the other agent went through.

"It'll be simple," Dulain said. They sat in a conference room, for once forsaking a clandestine location. "You're going to get the item, I have no doubt. The problem is, I'm sure there're more artifacts you can locate. If not, gather all the data. We can do a lot with alien information at this point."

"I recognize that," Cassie said, "but going off mission with these people is more difficult than you'd think. They're quite …"

"What?" Dulain asked.

Cassie shrugged. "Militant. They have processes and rules, regulations … You know what I'm talking about."

"She's right," Christina added. "I've seen their type in action and

they're not easy to fool around with."
Dulain waved his hand. "Okay, then use your authority I granted you."
"I think we need a better reason than that." Cassie shook her head. "Maybe I can convince them it's part of the mission without pulling out my trump card."
"Whatever you do, get us something more than the paltry mission objective." Dulain rolled his eyes. "Christina knows how to turn a calamity into opportunity. Otherwise we wouldn't be going to that planet, right?"
Christina shrugged. "To be honest, that was all luck."
"Well, luck is just an opportunity seized." Dulain turned to Cassie. "We won't be able to try my experiment with the Orb this time around. Going into the unknown with our tech is out of the question so the next time we make a quick trip, I'll be sure to push harder. I think they're excited at the prospect and the scientists agreed with me this time."
Dulain was referring to his thought that the Orb could interface with a living mind providing they were in hyperspace. Some property of that other dimension gave Cassie such a vision and they wanted to replicate it. Sadly, the experiment would be on hold until the Gnosis returned and wasn't tasked with a pressing assignment.
The Pahxin delegation worked out thanks to the joint task force. Two ships provided protection to Sol as a result and talks continued, this time on the safety of Earth. An announcement was made to the general population and the AIA helped craft a message that was incredibly positive.
It still caused a great deal of concern, protest and panic but it probably would've been a lot worse had they allowed the information to leak on its own. Conspiracy theorists were the worst. They caused the most trouble by suggesting the military knew about the aliens all along and had hidden it.
The government continued to push a positive message, constantly showing the good will of the Pahxin people and extolling the virtues of the missions the Gnosis had been on. They slowly let out the

different pieces of the puzzle they wanted people to know, talking about the alien races and all the wonders seen in space.
While many people found it worrisome, it inspired young people across the globe to apply for the military programs. The number of eligible recruits skyrocketed, and the naval academy was overwhelmed with applications. Cassie wasn't surprised. The prospect of adventure among the stars held great appeal for the young.
At least there will be more than enough people to pilot the next ships we're building.
"I'll be getting on the next shuttle out," Cassie said. "Is there anything else we need to discuss?"
"Just that we've been spending a lot of time with the other Pahxin," Dulain said. "Gil?"
"Yeah?" Cassie tilted her head. "What about him?"
"He's learning English quite well," Christina responded. "And he's definitely interested in sticking around here. Apparently, heading home isn't appealing considering his past."
"Yes, well, criminals are like that." Dulain shrugged. "Oh, I don't think he's some kind of terrorist or anything but I understand why he wouldn't want to go back to his own people. They're not as kind to … self-starters as we are. However, I think he might be the right man for this job. We're going to send him with you."
Cassie lifted a brow. "Does he want to go?"
"Yes, actually." Dulain grinned. "Apparently, the draw of archaeology was just too much to pass up. If for some reason you need to go spelunking or … whatever it's called … you'll be in good hands. After all, he's an expert, remember?"
Cassie felt cool hands touch her neck, distracting her from the memory. She opened her eyes and saw Doctor Sandra Berg peering into her face, looking worried. "There you are, Agent Alexander." Her voice was soothing, quiet but full of intensity. "I was afraid we might've lost you there for a moment. Can you talk?"
"Yes …" Cassie rubbed her eyes. "What happened?"
"You hit the ground pretty hard but the life support in this room fluctuated." Sandra scanned her with something. "It knocked you right

out. Same with Thayne."
"Will he be okay?"
"He's already walking around out in the hallway." Sandra stood and offered her a hand. "If you think you can get up, I see you've sufficiently recovered."
"Thanks." Cassie took her hand and got up. A wave of vertigo struck her but it passed in a moment. "So life support, huh?"
"The vents were flooded with smoke when these computers blew," Sandra explained. "Automated systems closed them and you essentially suffered from inhalation."
"What happened?" Cassie asked. "We were caught by that strange beam … Thayne and I were in the process of scanning it then …" She grunted. "I don't remember anything else."
"It brought us down to the planet's surface," Sandra replied. "We crashed and honestly, I'm desperately trying not to panic."
"Wow." Cassie nodded, heading for the door. "I should get to work now but thank you, doctor. Sincerely."
"Of course." Sandra sighed as she passed her by. "I need to get to the next event on the ship. We're all going to be busy as hell for a few hours. Hopefully, we can find a way to get back into space. All things considered, I never thought I'd be excited about leaving a planet. Good luck, Agent."
Cassie stepped into the hallway and leaned against the wall. She still felt a little wobbly on her feet but every breath seemed to steady her. Thayne stood nearby, speaking with a couple of engineers. They gestured to one of the panels in the hallway, discussing the best way to get the problem fixed.
They should probably just roll up their sleeves and get started. Cassie rubbed her eyes. Crash landed on the planet. The beam yanked us down here. How did it have so much force to be able to do that? What sort of power do these people have and when are they coming for us? I hope the marines are okay and ready for a fight.
Cassie turned to Thayne. "I'm heading to the bridge," she called. "Do you need anything from me before I go?"
"No, Agent. I'm glad to see you up though." Thayne paused. "Oh, let

the captain know I am assisting the engineering team with restoration of key services."
"Okay." Cassie headed off, hurrying to the first elevator. She wondered if it would be operational but it immediately opened. Five other crewmen were already crammed in. and she apologized as she joined them. They were pressed tightly together but each floor let someone off until they were near to the bridge.
Cassie had two levels to travel alone and she stared into space, considering the possibilities. She'd seen power readings through the Orb before which might've been able to yank a ship out of orbit. The Pahxin talked about beams which they could use to tow or otherwise move objects about in space.
The thing that caught them must've been the most highly advanced version of that device every constructed. Don't go down that path, Cassie warned herself with a thought. You can't start assuming you've found the pinnacle of anything when there are still so many planets you've never seen.
The elevator opened and she stepped onto the bridge, gasping at the activity going on. Several engineers were bustling about, taking panels off and operating on the internals of the ship. Desmond sat in his chair and Vincent stood with Salina at her station, the two of them running diagnostics.
Zach and Deacon collaborated at the helm, the latter typing things into a tablet. She wondered what they might be able to do without scans but didn't interrupt them. Heading over to her own station, she sat down and tried to login. The computer brought back a connection error.
"The network is currently down," Salina said. "Engineering thinks we'll have a connection established in a few minutes."
"Scans?"
"They're back up but the interface crashed hard." Salina frowned. "Vincent and I are nearly done with our diagnostic and it should work shortly. I'm hopeful at least. What happened down in the tech lab?"
"Computers caught fire," Cassie said. "Thayne and I were brought down by smoke inhalation. Most of that room is wrecked. It's going to

take a while to make it useful again. God knows how many computer parts were totally ruined in there but I have a feeling we'll have to replace everything."
"You really think so?" Vincent asked.
"Even if we scan each part individually and they come back showing normal, there's a chance the strain has reduced their life." Cassie shrugged, turning in her chair to look at the viewscreen. "Are the cameras down too?"
"Right now," Salina said. "Shields are active through some miracle and we've got weapons … So we're basically a stationary battle platform. The one thing I was able to determine with a hand scanner involved the fact we are still held in place by the strange beam that brought us down here. Oh, you know about that, right?"
"Yes, I found out." Cassie glanced back at her screen. The no connection error continued to flash. She pulled out her tablet and thanked a higher power it didn't get destroyed when she fell down. Tapping at it, she brought up her own application for scanning and checked the network.
Sure enough, the engineering team almost had it. They needed to correct some routing but otherwise, some parts of the ship were already back up and running. Even with the bridge on high priority, medical came online first followed by the still functioning technical lab. She thought about heading down there.
"Where's Gil?" Cassie asked. "Has anyone heard?"
"Doctor Vaedra," Vincent said, "was in his quarters when this happened. He's currently in engineering assisting with the computer problem. I had no idea he was so good with the tech."
"They all are," Salina replied. "Each Pahxin goes through technical training from a young age. Decades of space travel and honing your educational system ensured that they have the skills necessary to be in space and back each other up."
"Did you pick that up from some kind of exchange with their people?" Cassie asked. "When we were gearing up for this mission?"
"Partially. But Thayne and Gil both talked about it." Salina shrugged. "And … I think that we're done with the scan interface. Now for the

network." She got on her knees and popped the panel under her console. "New parts are all holding up so as soon as they get us online, we're ready to go."
Desmond turned in his seat. "Did I hear we're almost back?"
"Yes, sir," Salina said. "Just a few more minutes."
"Vincent, do we have security ready? Just in case?"
"They're armed and ready to go in a central location so wherever they need to be … they'll be."
"Good." Desmond pointed at Cassie. "When you have network connectivity, I want a full run down of this technology. I assume you and Thayne got something before we crashed?"
"Yes, and hopefully the data got backed up on the way down." Cassie shook her head. "I'll be honest, I don't remember anything from the moment we started moving until I woke up so if whatever we discovered isn't on the computer … Well …I suppose we can ask Thayne what he recalls." She told him about what happened in the tech lab.
Desmond winced. "I'm glad you're alright. We're all going to need a thorough check-up after this is over." He returned to his own tablet.
Cassie looked at the others. "How bad was it up here?"
"The captain was knocked out," Vincent said. "I got tossed into the wall but managed to take the blow with my shoulder. Shockingly, I suffered only a bruise. Salina busted up her knee and Deacon was totally fine. He managed to cling to his terminal and got shaken around but otherwise, as the engineers like to say, took no appreciable damage."
"Lucky him." Cassie rubbed her eyes again, trying to fend off a sense of exhaustion. The unknown part of their situation finally hit her and she started to worry. Anything could be going on outside the hull. Aliens might've been on their way to capture them, if they weren't already in some kind of facility.
A sense of urgency weighed on Cassie and she tried to breathe through it. There was nothing to be done quickly. Operational status would happen but it required patience. None of them had it just then and she could feel the tension in every person around her. She wondered if

they should consider arming the crew.
If tensions get too high that might be a poor idea. Cassie considered the fact they were all under a great deal of stress and having a firearm probably wouldn't help matters if people argued. Of course, the thought of two people shooting it out while they were trying to repair the ship didn't make sense but then again, inexplicable things happened.
Cassie thought about her life before she joined the Gnosis, the life of an analyst who spent most of her time training for a mission she thought would never come. Some of it bored her but as she sat there stranded on an alien world far from home, she wondered if she'd rather be there.
Safety held a natural appeal but the men and women around her made the thought feel treasonous. They were in this situation together and Cassie hoped she might be able to contribute in a meaningful way, providing some service no one else could. If her presence helped, she knew she was where she belonged.
Yes, sitting at home at a computer terminal sounded fantastic just then but once she got busy, she knew she'd forget about that. Home would never challenge her like traveling the stars. The men and women of the Gnosis asked her to do things she'd hardly considered before, real tasks requiring her to be creative and think.
The AIA was more about crunching data than coming up with new ideas. Other people set the course, the rest of them simply did their part to get them there. Most of the time without having a clue as to how their efforts applied to the larger plan. When Dulain promoted Cassie to senior agent, she got a glimpse into the world she'd been forced to take for granted.
I prefer knowing what's going on to being safe and locked away. This is what I trained for and didn't even know it. Applying myself to real problems rather than the tiny parts I was handed. Cassie turned back to her terminal and the new message interrupted her thoughts. It said connection established.
"Looks like we're back in business, everyone," Cassie called. "My station's ready to go and I'm going to start my scans now."

“We’re on it as well,” Salina said. “In a few minutes, we should know just how lucky we were … and potentially how little fortune we possess.”

She just had to say that, Cassie thought as she brought her applications online. Always with the pessimism at the end.

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Chapter 2

Vincent fought back a bout of frustration as he struggled to clear up communications from the bridge to other parts of the ship. Static continually saturated the lines, forcing people to repeat themselves multiple times. The inefficiency made their repair progress slow and it especially concerned him when it came to defending the ship.

If they needed to fight, talking would be essential. He wondered if the beam holding them in place might be causing the interference but until Salina had a chance to use the scanner again, no one would know. There were other potential contributors to their problems, up to and including faulty relays.

When Salina called out they were back online, Vincent nearly cheered but whatever started working for her did nothing to clear up his communications. “Captain, I’m heading to engineering to help coordinate from there for a time. I’m barely effective up here. There’s too much noise.”

“I’ll hold this together,” Desmond replied. “Send me a text message if you have a report. We can keep the lines free for coordination between the repair teams.”

“Yes, sir.” Vincent hit the elevator button and had to wait. He looked at Cassie, his gaze lingering for several moments before the doors hissed beside him. Once he was alone, he leaned against the wall and let out a long breath, closing his eyes. Exhaustion pressed at his eyes, mostly from the stress of the situation.

And I didn’t even get hurt. Those who were tossed around must be absolutely miserable.

The medical bay reported dozens of patients. Only a handful couldn’t return to duty but a few probably shouldn’t have. No one wanted to be stranded on an alien world and it became clear they’d rather work than stay in bed wondering. Under the circumstances, Doctor Holland let several of the crew leave when he normally wouldn’t have.

I don’t blame him, Vincent thought. No one’s going to be a good patient right now. And I have a feeling Captain Bradford would push

to get people on the job as soon as possible. Getting dragged to the surface definitely called for all hands on deck.

Vincent disembarked and headed for engineering, surprised to find the hallway clear. Two guards stood near the closed door and saluted as he approached. “This seems quiet,” he said. “Isn’t that odd?”

The two men exchanged looks between one another before the one on the left answered. “Sir … Well … You’ll see in a moment.”

Oh boy.

The door to engineering opened and the silence outside was instantly shattered by the chaos within. Vincent stepped into the room and looked over the various technicians darting about, carrying tools and shouting information to one another. He wondered how they were able to get anything done with the way they were carrying on.

Where the hell is Webber? How could he let it devolve into this?

Vincent grabbed the arm of a man trying to dart by him and earned a glare. Once the technician saw who stopped him, his expression melted and he offered a sloppy salute. “I’m sorry, sir, I need to check something right away.”

“Just direct me to the Chief Engineer, please.”

“Back that way.” The tech gestured vaguely and hurried off.

Vincent didn’t bother anyone else but tried to dodge his way through the crowd, moving toward the hyperdrive section. He found Chief Engineer Nathaniel Webber gesturing sharply at a panel with three people around him. They finished their conversation just as Vincent stepped up to them and the technicians dashed off.

“What do you need, Bowman?” Webber glared. “I’m a little busy down here right now.”

“I know, I’m here to help coordinate.” Vincent hummed. “Where can you use me?”

“Um …” Webber gestured to the opposite side of the room. “We’re working on cleaning up coms. Help those guys over there. One of the best things we can do right now will be to make it easier to talk to each other. With the marines gearing up for potential trouble, I’m pretty sure they don’t want to be shouting old school.”

“Likely not.” Vincent hesitated. “What do you think it’s going to take

to get out of here? With that beam on us?"
"Someone's going to have to shut it off," Webber replied. "There's no way to break it, believe me. Doctor Vaedra helped confirm that. Apparently, it's like their tractor beams only about a thousand times stronger. Whatever threw it on us can do it for a long time too because according to these readings from the surface of the ship, it's still on."
"Perpetual energy …" Vincent rubbed his chin. "Like from an Orb?"
"Maybe." Webber gestured with his head toward the other side of the room. "But for now, we need to focus on getting these repairs done."
Vincent nodded, heading over to the other crew members. He wondered about the idea of shutting off such a device, perhaps even blowing it up. Was this another automated system left behind by an alien race or had they encountered a hostile group intent on holding them there? He wanted to get out there and find out but they were still in crisis mode.

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Cassie brought up her scan program and clapped her hands when it instantly launched without an error. She squinted at the screen as data came pouring in. A few graphics filled the left side, showing a topographical map of the area and several heat points, which indicated advanced technology.
We're not in a city or facility, Cassie thought. So they've put us on the surface. Now we just have to determine the source of that beam.
Her scans of the advanced tech came back and she frowned at the results. They were other ships, showing signs of massive damage. The beam may not have been necessary to bring them down considering the magnitude of their injuries. One of them was so bad off, it took her a moment to find a similar silhouette and call it out as a Tol'An vessel.
"The Tol'An crashed here," Cassie called out. "The ship isn't even two miles away."
"Maybe there's something specific about this area," Desmond

suggested, “something that drew us close then pulled us down.”
“I’ve got a facility nearby,” Salina said. “Roughly three miles away. Some kind of structure made of stone, I think … or a composite of stone and metal. My readings suggest it is over eighty-thousand years old and I may be off by a few thousand considering the state of our equipment.” She paused. “That may be the source of the beam.”
“Let’s be sure,” Desmond said. “I don’t want to plan an expedition without having some concrete reason to leave the ship. Get Vaedra to look at your data.”
“There are people!” Cassie called. She found numerous life forms around both ships. As she tried to determine who the other vessel belonged to, she caught their numbers and they seemed to be on the move. “From both ships! Some of them survived the crash … and they are definitely armed.”
“Fantastic.” Desmond tapped the communicator and dialed in engineering. “Is Vincent down there?”
“Captain.” Vincent’s voice sounded far clearer than Cassie expected. They must’ve made headway on cleaning up the interference. “We’re nearly done with the coms. What’s going on?”
“We have hostiles and they might be incoming.” Desmond joined Salina at her station then looked at Cassie’s. “How long can we keep the shields up?”
“We’re going to have to take them down soon if we want to finish the repairs on the engines,” Vincent said. “The emitters and generators took a beating anyway when we hit the ground. Chances are they’re going to drop and they weren’t prioritized since they weren’t keeping us alive at the time.”
“Put them higher on the list,” Desmond said. “We need to keep those up. Are our turrets in a good position to defend the ship?”
“The top ones won’t be much use,” Vincent replied, “but the bottom cannons are available. Their systems are somewhat sketchy though so I’m not sure I’d rely on them too heavily. How many are on approach?”
“Unfortunately, we don’t have exact numbers right now.” Desmond frowned. “Let’s go with a lot until we get better data. What about

launching fighters? Is it even possible? I see we're surrounded by trees."
"Mostly deciduous," Salina announced. "There are some fir trees … but it's fascinating how much alike these are to Earth's. I expected them to be far more alien, different colors at least but this is—"
"Salina …" Desmond interrupted. "What about getting the fighters out?"
Cassie cleared her throat before replying, "If we knock a few of the trees out of the way, we should be fine."
"Some of the pilots were injured," Salina added. "I'll get a roster of who we can scramble and get them ready."
"Air support would be good," Desmond said, returning to his seat. "Our primary task needs to be getting the hell out of here."
"Gil is looking over my findings now," Cassie replied. "He thinks he'll have an update shortly."
"Good but he needs to hurry."
Salina cleared her throat.
"What is it?" Desmond asked. Cassie glanced back and saw him scowling at the lieutenant. "You have an opinion."
"Even if he does hurry, sir, we have to enact whatever plan that research warrants."
"Yes?" Desmond prompted.
"Well … it's just that … it will likely take time. I sincerely doubt we will be so lucky as to have a power plant to blow up. I'm sure it will be more in depth." Salina shrugged.
"The longer it takes for us to start attempting our escape, the more time these hostiles have to shoot at us." Desmond turned to look at the blank screen. "I'm of the opinion we need to make things happen quickly so we're making progress toward that goal. Do you agree with that assessment?"
"Yes, sir." Salina returned to her station and started tapping away.
Cassie recognized the need for expedience given the situation. She believed they would need to head into the facility she identified to get off the planet. Her scans showed enormous energy pouring out of some subterranean catacomb but she couldn't tell if it was natural or

not. The metal walls of the structure interfered with the scanner.
If only we could just go out there and look, this would be a lot easier. My tablet could gather the data we need at point-blank range.
“Captain,” Salina broke the temporary silence. “The approaching people are within communication range.”
“Try to hail them,” Desmond said. “Maybe we’re jumping the gun thinking they’re coming to attack us. They might want some help. Considering the state of our ship, they might be under the impression we came down here of our own accord.”
“Because the ship isn’t banged up?” Zach asked. “That makes sense.”
Salina spoke into her microphone quietly, attempting to establish a connection. She stooped over the console for several moments when Cassie saw her straighten suddenly. She tapped away on the computer, moving swiftly before turning in her seat to address the captain. “I’ve picked up a message.”
“What is it?”
“The translator has revealed that one of the two groups are mercenaries. They’re speaking tactically about cover and how to breach the ship. They’re not friendlies.”
“And the others?” Desmond asked.
“Tol’An … and I only know that because the mercenaries talked about killing them to limit the competition for the Gnosis. I think they’re going to start shooting each other before they can fire at us.”
“Convenient,” Cassie muttered. “If we have to leave the ship, they might be too distracted to stop us.”
“Indeed.” Desmond hummed. “Vincent, get the marines ready. We have confirmed hostile contact. We’re still trying to get some intel on their weapons and you have a few minutes since there are two opposing forces out there but regardless, I want our defenses impregnable with the time we have at our disposal. Get to work.”

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Lieutenant Brent Fielding only joined the Gnosis during their last mission. He saw far more action than he anticipated with the crew,

especially considering the diplomatic nature of their previous outing. It seemed exploring alien worlds and architecture would've been their primary duty but combat worked just as well for him.

No one's going to be bored on this ship.

Fielding went over his roster the moment the ship settled, checking in on each of his people for injury. Captain Darren Gabriel took a good knock to the head and found himself in the medical bay but the boots on the ground were ready to go. After receiving authorization to make command decisions for the teams, he assembled the marines in the armory.

They showed up in short order and Fielding could sense their apprehension, the worry brought on by the situation. He shared their concerns but didn't show them outwardly. Anxiety didn't help anyone and he had no intention of contributing negatively to the people under his command.

Fielding put a foot on the bench and leaned on his knee. "Listen up, folks. We're grounded for now and command is looking for a way to get us out of here. In the meantime, we have multiple problems."

"Isn't that always how it is?" Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow threw out the comment. Everyone called him Heat for a variety of reasons. Stocky, dark haired and tough, he was a poster-perfect, hardened soldier.

"We've gotta keep things interesting," Fielding replied. "Problem number one involves a large group of hostiles moving on our position. We have three advantages: first, there seems to be two factions and they want each other's blood. Second, the automated defenses should be able to drive them off, at least to some degree. And third, there's us."

"What about the shields?" Sergeant Alex Gillet asked. "Won't they keep them out?"

"I'm told the generators aren't stable right now." Fielding shrugged. "So they won't keep much out for long. That's why we're going to be suited up and ready. We're dealing with some kind of mercenaries and the Tol'An. Hopefully, they do some serious damage to one another before we even get started."

“Why are they bothering us?” Sergeant Lawrence Gorman piped in. “We’re just as stranded as they are. What do they want? Supplies?”
“According to scans,” Fielding explained, “their ships didn’t make it down here intact. They can’t get those tubs back into space but the Gnosis looks unscathed. I’m sure they’re under the impression it can fly again. Unfortunately, it’s not going anywhere until we get that beam off of us. Which leads us to the second big problem we’ve got.”
Several of them groaned.
“What’s all that?” Fielding asked. “Why the complaining before we even talked about that?”
“Because,” Heat said, “we all know what that means. Someone’s going to have to blow something up.”
“It might not be that simple, I’m afraid.” Fielding pushed away from the bench. “If it was, we’d send in a couple bombers and watch the action from here. There’s a nearby facility that we might have to penetrate. Those Pahxin doctors are looking into it now from what I understand and when they know for sure, we’ll have an expedition to escort.”
“And then blow something up,” Heat added.
“It might be a switch,” Fielding replied. “Don’t look at everything like it’s a nail. Sometimes, we can be subtle.”
Gorman pointed to one of their suits of power armor lined up against the wall. “What’s subtle about that?”
“The futuristic paint scheme,” Fielding answered. “Let’s suit up, gentlemen. We’ll worry about the facility when we’re given more data. Right now, we need to shoot at things. I think we can all agree on that being an easy sell. Can I get a hoorah?”
The men shouted it back and moved to their suits. Fielding found his own, amused at the amount of personality his men possessed. They were definitely an elite unit with all the understanding of their accomplishments to go with it. He didn’t mind so much, his old crew acted much the same way.
And they hadn’t come close to knocking out the crazy ass missions these men had already completed.
A few minutes later, they were in the hangar, standing before the

closed door. Each of them checked their weapons and reported themselves ready. Several pilots were boarding their vessels, prepared to provide air support once a few trees were knocked down. Commander Bowman tasked Fielding with clearing away the obstacles.

Probably need to make some space before we get out of here too, Fielding thought. I'm shocked we didn't cause a massive forest fire with our landing to be honest.

Heat's voice crackled in his speaker. "Scans are picking up gunfire outside. A lot of it."

"I'm seeing …" Gorman hummed. "Forty people on either side of the ship and slightly to the north. They're fighting in the hills, away from the automated defenses."

"Smart move," Fielding said. "Keep the amount of unpredictable fire down to a minimum. I'm thinking we should get on top of the Gnosis, take out our obstacles and let the pilots loose on them. Heat, Gorman and Gillet, you're on hangar duty. You see any movement out there that isn't us, kill it."

"Yes, sir." Heat didn't sound pleased at the prospect. Guard duty never appealed to anyone but Fielding trusted their aim better than some of the others.

"The rest of you join me on the roof. Should be able to make it in a single bounce. On my lead."

The doors opened and Fielding leaped out, hitting his jump jets and spinning midair. He sailed above the Gnosis and landed roughly on the hull, dropping into a crouch. The others touched down around him, each pair of booted feet causing a loud clatter from metal on metal. He stepped over to the edge and looked over, surprised at their height.

No idea why I thought this wouldn't be tall but Jesus, this is one massive ship.

Looking left and right, he realized just how massive the Gnosis was. It should've left a larger crater and had their pilot not performed some serious last second efforts, they probably would've all been dead. It didn't surprise him that the other vessels were damaged beyond

repair. If they were remotely as big, they were probably crumpled like a wad of paper.
The trees in front of the hangar weren't that tall and as he took aim with his rifle, he knew they could take the few down that were needed to provide a decent path. Fielding marked various targets for the others and they lit them up, tearing through the foliage. Cracking wood burst out, competing with distant gunfire.
Fielding got on the com to Commander Bowman. "Pilots should be able to get out now. They might have to buzz some plants, but otherwise, we took care of the obstacles."
"Great," Bowman replied. "Do you have contact with the enemy forces yet?"
"Negative. They seem to be having their own party a little ways to the north. We could crash it if you want, but I'm thinking they're more than welcome to limit their numbers without us."
"I'll leave it to your discretion but the captain wants to ensure our defenses are solid. We've got time to build it up."
"I've got an idea." Fielding added the other marines to the feed. "Gentlemen, do we have any gun emplacements on the ship? Turrets and the like?"
"Negative," Heat replied. "This is an exploration vessel, sir. We've got grenades and us."
"Hm. Okay." Fielding made a note to requisition some more defensive measures when they got home. "I guess we're it then. Okay, everyone on the hull of the Gnosis and get into position so you can see movement on all sides. We're going to be on overwatch until they approach and when they do, call your contact."
"High ground," Gillet said, "heavy armor and firepower … These guys don't stand a chance."
"I wouldn't get cocky." Fielding checked his scanner again. "They seem to have some pretty decent equipment out there and I promise you one thing: your enemies have nothing to lose. If they fail to take the Gnosis, they're stuck here forever. Remember that as you go forward. Desperation will make them reckless and that means unpredictable."

The marines made it into position. Fielding scanned the horizon and nearly jumped when someone shouted into their microphone.
“Contact west!” They opened fire, laying into someone near the engine area.
Fielding engaged his HUD to see from their camera’s perspective.
“Stay here,” he ordered the men with him. “Keep watch.” He engaged his jump jet as he saw a squad of enemies charge the ship. One of them took a shot straight to the head, dropping to the ground. The others took cover behind trees.
“They’ve got cover,” Heat said. “Behind the trees. There are at least four more targets and they’re biding their time. I don’t think they know what direction my attack came from.”
“They’ll know if we take pot shots,” Gorman said.
Fielding landed behind them and crouched, approaching slowly. “I’m here,” he said. “Mark their locations on the HUD.”
A moment later four red squares appeared, showing where the enemies had taken cover. Fielding reached the edge and aimed his weapon, zooming in the scope. He hoped to find some exposed portion of a target, anything at all he might take a shot at. He thought he made out a leg when a beam splashed against the shield not even twenty feet from his head.
“They found us,” Gorman said. “They were probably scanning.”
Heat grunted. “I can get down there and finish them off right now if you want. Just say the word.”
“Settle down,” Fielding replied. “Fall back in case the shields drop and these pricks get lucky. No one needs to get popped in the face right now.”
They took a few paces back. “What do they think they’re even doing?” Gorman asked. “They can’t get in here while the shields are up.”
“Worry about what they think they can do,” Gillet said. “If they can scan for you, then they know there are shields there.”
“Shit.” Fielding hummed. “Maybe you’re right, Heat. I’m just concerned about their weapons and what they could do to our armor.”
“Standard Tol’An stuff it looks like,” Heat replied. “Give me the word and we can finish them off before they can … do whatever they’re

going to do."
"What're you going to do?"
Heat chuckled. "Something reckless."
"Great." Fielding sighed. "Fine, you and Gorman enact your plan. I want you out there with backup. We'll cover you from here."
"Oh, thanks," Gorman muttered. "I really appreciate the opportunity to do something stupid today."
"Relax," Heat said. "You love my plans. On my count of three, jump. You take the left flank and I'll go for their rear. Got it?"
"Just … start counting."
Fielding crept to the edge again, aiming his weapon out over the field. The two marines counted off and hit their jump packs, flying off toward the enemy. Heat overshot them and spun in the air, landing hard behind them. His weapon began barking, the muzzle flashes little more than fireflies against the foliage below.
Gorman started shooting before he even touched the ground. Beam weapons tried to return fire but the panicked shots of the enemy didn't even come close. Fielding was about to relax when one of the Tol'An burst from cover and charged the shield. "Whoa, contact! One's making a break for it!"
He took aim and fired, catching the man in the leg. He stumbled, spun in place then lunged toward the shield. A bright flash erupted around him and when it cleared, the body was totally obliterated. Static danced over the ship's shields and a moment later, they dropped, their subtle warble replaced by the clear sky.
"Oh shit." Fielding sighed. "What the hell did he just do?"
"He had some kind of disruptor," Heat said. "One of these guys has one too."
"They'll be coming," Gorman said. "Now that they know their plan worked, they'll be coming in force."
"Bad news," Corporal Vine called out. He was stationed on the eastern side of the ship. "The enemies have either made a truce or they've decided we're the bigger threat. We have contact on this side."
Gunfire punctuated his report.
"Heat, Gorman, get back up here." Fielding brought Commander

Bowman on the line. “Sir, we have a huge problem that you might already be partially aware of but … the two sides are charging now. We’ll do what we can down here but if you’re going to put fighters in the air, now’s the time.”

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Chapter 3

Desmond turned as Vincent cursed. “Problem?”
“Shields are down,” Vincent said. “Some kind of disruption device … An enemy sacrificed his life to deliver it. The marines are engaged but they have a lot of numbers down there. I’m trying to scramble the pilots but the hangar’s having some system issues right now. Engineering’s working on it.”
“Never rains …” Desmond sighed. “Salina, Zach, can either of you get the shields back up?”
“Engineering was already struggling to keep them going,” Salina said. “The generators were strained by our landing and a couple of the emitters are out. They need to be replaced. I’ll do what I can to divert power.”
“Cassie.” Desmond turned to the agent. “Please tell me you have something.”
“Gil has confirmed my report that the beam’s power source originates from the nearby facility.” Cassie sighed. “But there’s nothing we can do from up here. The walls are shielded metal and I ran a couple simulations. Our bombs, powerful as they are, cannot penetrate the planet deep enough to damage the power source.”
“Are you sure about that?” Vincent asked. “We could try.”
“It might simply make getting in there impossible,” Cassie said. “If we destroy the entrance, we’ll be stuck here until they run out of power … and considering they seem to be drawing it from the thermal core of the planet, I think that would take longer than we’re willing to commit.”
“What do we need to do then?” Desmond asked. “Go down there?”
“I’m afraid so …” Cassie turned back to her station. “And from what Gil has said to me, it won’t be as easy as strolling in.”
“Why would it be?” Vincent asked. “Hold on … I think we’ve got hangar control again.”
Desmond looked at the reports flashing on his screen. The marines were heavily engaged, battling on two fronts. The enemy knew where

the turrets could reach them and were staying out of their line of fire. They were held at bay for the moment but their sheer numbers gave them a good chance at boarding the Gnosis eventually.

He joined Salina and looked at her scans, scowling at the readings. The beam was not only still holding the Gnosis but the other two ships were also contained within it. He turned to Vincent. “If we launch the fighters, won’t they be effected by this beam? They can’t survive being grounded by this thing.”

Salina pointed at her screen. “Look at how it’s spread over our hull. They’ll launch clear of the beam because it literally is touching the surface of the ship. It’s not a bubble … but a form-fitting field.”

“I’m still not entirely sure … Why wouldn’t another beam grab our ships?” Desmond shrugged. “We don’t have data to prove otherwise.”

“Do you want me to hold on air support then?” Vincent asked. “We’ll need to arm more security personnel and get the marines some help.”

Desmond considered the risk versus reward. If they got fighters out there, the ground forces against them would be easily managed. However, if they simply lost pilots or had to launch a rescue mission, they’d be adding to their problems rather than solving them. They needed more information before they could commit the manpower and equipment.

“Tell them to standby,” Desmond ordered. “Get as many security personnel in place to repel these assholes as possible. Cassie, I assume Gil is going to need to go on this expedition to the facility. Am I right about that?”

“He has the most experience with this type of thing,” Cassie replied. “Who else do you think should go?”

“My preferred mission team is Gil, Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow, Sergeant Gorman, and you.” Desmond turned back to his computer. “You’ll be in operational command throughout the duration. Vincent, please prep that team and get them ready to depart. Like I said before, we don't have time to dawdle so we need to find a way to get them to the facility as quickly as possible.”

“Um … I’m not sure I’m the right …” Cassie sighed. “Yes, sir. I’ll … head down and get ready.”

“Salina, you’re on full tech scans,” Desmond said. “And can someone get the screen back up? I’d like to see what’s happening out there. If we’re going to help people coordinate their efforts, we need to lift the blinders.”

***

Vincent hit the elevator button and let Cassie board ahead of him. He hit the button for the armory level and watched her take several deep breaths. Part of him wanted to reach out and touch her shoulder, to offer some comfort about the mission she’d just been assigned. He didn’t envy her. It would’ve taken a lot for him to want to head out into the alien world.

They had gone to dinner when they were home. Sneaking off base during a shift change, they enjoyed a quiet evening together before having to rush back to their duties. He thought it went well but he found it difficult to read her. She wasn’t aloof so much as … challenging.

Now, he saw her vulnerability. The AIA may had trained her well, but she’d only been away from the ship once and that resulted in a running gun battle. While she handled herself well and didn’t seem overly disturbed by her experience, he wondered if it bothered her more than she let on.

The marines on the Gnosis were not only trained for the type of job they were doing, but they had all been in combat prior to taking to the stars. They were veterans of conflicts and being shot at was not unfamiliar. Most of the officers who were chosen for the job had enough experience with their duties to take challenges in stride. Cassie was one of the few people in a high position who hadn’t been in the field.

They disembarked the elevator and Vincent paused, drawing a concerned look from Cassie. “Is everything alright?” She asked.

“Yeah.” Vincent smiled. “Go on ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“Okay …” Cassie stepped away.

When Vincent was certain he was out of earshot, he raised the captain

on his com. “That was fast,” Desmond said. “What’s going on? Is there another problem?”
“No, sir.” Vincent sighed. “I had an idea about this mission to the facility. I feel I should lead the mission. Cassie lacks the experience to be in charge of something like that and the marines aren’t really appropriate considering there shouldn’t be any combat in there. I’d like permission to run with this.”
“I hope you’re not suggesting you go because you have a thing for that girl.”
Desmond’s comment made Vincent’s cheeks burn and he had to bite back an indignant quip. He took a deep breath and asked, “Do you disagree with my assessment about the people going?”
“We could pull Lieutenant Fielding to go with them.”
“Another marine,” Vincent said, “and he’s going to be busy protecting the ship. Zach can coordinate the pilots for me if they’re able to launch. I seriously believe it would be in our best interests if I went on this mission.”
“Hm.” Desmond hesitated for a long moment, making Vincent’s heart race as he waited. When he finally spoke up, he sounded dubious. “Okay … you can go. I’m leery about this, Vincent. If we weren’t down Captain Gabriel, you’d be staying here.”
“Understood, sir.” Vincent smirked. “If it helps, I’m not thrilled at the idea of heading into the creepy alien facility.”
“No one probably is. Get them all back safely and turn that beam off. Also, not to add more pressure on you, but hurry up. I’d like to get out of here before our friends come up with some new trick to cause us trouble.”
“Of course.” Vincent killed the connection and jogged to catch up with Cassie. She was waiting around the corner, leaning against the wall. He nearly collided with her, pausing in his step. Eyes wide, he cleared his throat. “Um … Hi … What’s up? I um … I thought you’d be down in the armory by now.”
“I eavesdropped,” Cassie replied. “Pardon my curiosity.”
Vincent’s cheeks burned again and he moved away, heading down the hall. “We’d better get a move on,” he muttered. “We don’t have a lot

of time and we still need to figure out how to get into the facility."
"You don't have to come with us," Cassie said. "I can manage the team. I … I don't want you to risk yourself unnecessarily."
"Hey." Vincent stopped and took her arm, looking her in the eyes. "I'm doing this for a lot of reasons, and yes … one of them is you. Let's say you were the only thing compelling me to leave the ship. I can tell you right now, I'd call it necessary."
"I appreciate the chivalry." Cassie frowned. "You'll be a welcome addition, for sure. Especially with the marines. They can be gruff to work with but … I don't really know what I'm trying to say."
Vincent grinned. "Then don't say anything. We're good, Cassie. Besides, I'm starting to get lazy up here on the ship all the time. I need to stretch my legs. Show the team I'm not a console jockey. If I take a captain's promotion, I'll never be able to do these missions. Might be my last chance to experience an alien environment first hand."
"Then far be it from me to turn you down." Cassie walked away, picking up the pace.
They arrived at the armory and found Gil Vaedra gearing up. He wore an environmental suit with a rebreather hanging about his neck. A pistol was strapped low to his thigh and several gadgets clung to his belt. He looked up and offered a smile, nodding to them. While he had picked up a great deal of English, he still acted as a man of few words.
Vincent changed into his own suit, choosing both a pistol and a small submachine gun he could easily wear on his side. He made sure the outfit was secure before tapping his com and bringing Lieutenant Fielding on the line. The man wouldn't be pleased with the next orders but he'd proven to be flexible enough, even during dangerous encounters.
"What is it?" Fielding asked. The sound of gunfire filtered through the speakers.
"I need two marines," Vincent replied. "Heathrow and Gorman. We need to get into that facility and free the ship."
"Damn it!" Fielding cursed. "Hold on!" There were sounds of metal on metal footfalls. "Say again? Did you just say you need a couple of my best men?"

“I need some escorts,” Vincent replied. “Even if we kill all those people, we can’t get out of here if we don’t head into the facility soon. The captain wants us to hurry and I know those men are familiar with this type of thing. It’s definitely their type of mission.”
“But considering what we’re going through out here, don’t you think we should get rid of the hostiles first?” Fielding grunted. “You guys are serious about this.”
“Yes, we really need to get out there. I’ve already given orders to arm the rest of the security personnel and give them bigger guns. They’re ready to help hold off the assault. But right now, we need some tough guys who can help us out.”
“Without the power armor,” Fielding said. “Because you have no idea how big the passages are in there. They might not fit otherwise.”
“Exactly.”
Fielding sighed. “They’ll be on their way in a moment. This is crazy, Bowman. I’d do this differently if I were you. But I’m not so … let them disengage.”
“Thank you.”
Vincent understood his concerns and he had a valid point. Unfortunately, there was a chance that they wouldn’t be done holding off that force for several hours, maybe even more. Depending on how big the facility was, they might be done long before the conflict ended. Furthermore, if they shut off the beam, their enemies may want to talk.
After all, their ships would no longer be stuck either. If they cooperated, they could fix their vessels and leave together. The thought felt naive but he entertained it, if only out of his desire for peace. The Tol’An in particular would never bother to call a truce. They’d fight to the end. The other group might not be so quick to make such a decision.
While they waited for the marines, Vincent sent a text message to Desmond and Salina, offering them the idea to try for communications with the mercenary group. Maybe they could be reasoned with and even become allies toward escaping the world. If their ship was a total loss, the Gnosis had room to bring some folks on board.

Of course, if they turned out to be criminals in their own right, they'd be back to square one as far as conflict went. With our luck, they'll turn out to be pirates who were fighting the Tol'An and crashed here without the beam.

Heat and Gorman entered the room wearing their power armor. They moved over to the frames that held them and hopped out and secured their gear before turning to Vincent. Neither of them looked happy but they went about preparing for the assignment, throwing on their hazard suits and grabbing small arms.

At least they're not complaining. Not yet at least. Vincent turned to Cassie who hovered close to Gil. He pointed to something on her tablet and she nodded before making some sort of modification. He figured the archaeologist would be incredibly useful but he wished the captain would've allowed Cassie to stay behind.

She's not going to be in the way but with the people we're bringing, we don't need her. Hell, they probably don't need me either.

"Okay, folks," Vincent spoke loudly. "Listen up. Our assignment involves getting into an alien facility, finding the source of the beam holding the Gnosis and shutting it down. We cannot bomb the structure because power readings are too far beneath the surface. Furthermore, we don't know what to expect in there."

Heat huffed. "So pretty much the worst possibly scenario imaginable."

"It gets better," Vincent replied. "Part of the challenge will be getting there. We have a fight going on outside between two factions trying to get into the ship. Slipping through their lines won't be easy and when we do, we still need to travel three miles overland to get there. It could be chaotic."

"Understatement," Gorman muttered. He spoke up so the others could hear. "Why don't we wait for the marines to finish these guys off? Make it so we don't have to worry about them."

Gil raised his hand. "I can answer. You see, we do not know if an alien intelligence will be on their way to see new catch. We want to be gone before they bother us or return."

Vincent was impressed at how much English he had learned and his accent didn't color it much either. Thayne had a better command but

Gil picked it up fast. And it had been considered one of the hardest languages to learn back on Earth. He shuddered to think about how hard Pahxin was to master.
“So we’re worried about scarier aliens showing up,” Gorman said.
“Makes sense to me.” He glanced at Heat. “You got any ideas of how we can get out there? I’m not worried about the commander or the agent … but this guy …”
“You don’t remember what he was up to when we met him?” Heat asked. “He hung around a seedy bar with criminals. I think we’ve got a scrappy crew here but stray shots don’t care how bad ass you are. And there’s a lot of fire going on around there. I’m afraid we’re going to have to take the long way around.”
Gorman groaned. “I was afraid you’d say that.”
“What do you mean?” Vincent asked. “What’s the long way around?”
“The enemy forces are coming from the east and west,” Heat explained. “They were fighting just to the north. Your facility is on the other side of the front line of their attack but we’ve got a clear shot to the south, through the forest.”
“So we head out,” Gorman continued, “and we loop around the entire group, coming at the facility from the opposite side. It’ll add … What do you think, Heat? Another mile? Two?”
“Three, easily,” Heat replied. “Shouldn’t be too bad of a hike … It’s the best bet to avoid being shot before we get there.” He paused. “Do we know about any automated defense? And let me tell you before you answer, I’m sick to death of those things. I wouldn’t be sad if I never saw another turret again.”
“Not that we’ve detected,” Cassie replied. “Unfortunately, I can’t promise they aren’t there.”
“Of course.” Heat sighed. “Commander, you good with our plan?”
Vincent nodded. “Well, I’m behind it but I’m not good with it. Sounds rough. How long do you think it’ll take us to get to where we’re going?”
“Couple hours,” Heat said. “And that’s if we really hoof it. I’d recommend we get going now. We’ve got the gear. You guys just stay light and try to keep up. There won’t be time for stopping if this is

really so damn important but I'm going to tell you … chances are good the marines will finish these guys off long before we get to the facility."
"If they route," Gorman added, "then they might stumble on us."
"Then we'll be careful." Heat patted his shoulder. "Come on, folks. Time for a stroll."

***

Desmond looked up as the screen came alive, showing a wild battle transpiring just off to the west. The Tol'An forces were still shooting at the other group, blasting away with suppressive fire. Salina put another view up side by side, this one of the opposite side of the ship where the marines engaged more enemies trying to board the ship. The turrets caught some careless targets, blasting them when they tried to dart past. Those weapons practically obliterated the bodies, each blast enough to take down a fully functional fighter or shuttle. The ship was temporarily safe, but he had a bad feeling they were on borrowed time.
Vincent and his team left the ship, heading south to avoid the fighting. They'd be gone for a while and Desmond needed to hold down the fort. Even with security personnel and half the ship armed, he didn't know how possible it would be to keep them out. The shields were already down and he didn't have a report on how long to restore them.
"What's going on with our defenses?" Desmond asked. "Any ETA?"
"No, sir," Salina said. "And I've got some bad news. It seems that the beam isn't just holding us in place."
Desmond refrained from a groan. He wasn't in the mood for more bad news. "So what is it doing?"
"It seems to be draining our power as well … Just the reactors at the moment. Hand held devices are fine." Salina paused. "I am seeing some blips on the scanner … fast moving … I think someone has fielded some fighters, sir."
Damn it. I still don't trust this beam to let our ships launch but I don't

think I'm going to have a choice.
"Launch one of ours," Desmond said. "Let them pick … If it works out, get a squadron up but if it doesn't … I want rescue standing by."
"Yes, sir." Salina spoke quietly into the com.
Power … fighters … this is crazy. "How long before our power is drained completely?"
Salina finished her conversation before responding. "Estimated time … seven hours, thirty minutes."
"And it's going to take our ground team at least a couple hours to get to their destination." Desmond rubbed his eyes. "Okay. Now we know why they're all over us. Their ships have already been drained beyond the point of achieving orbit. Will conserving power do anything for us to buy some time?"
"Calculating …" Salina tapped away and shook her head. "I don't have enough data to prove it one way or another but we might as well try it. If we shut down nonessential systems, we might buy some time."
"Do whatever it takes. Even another hour will go a long way."
Desmond stood up and turned to Zach. "Got a report on those planets?"
"There are several capable of supporting life," Zach replied. "Looks like there were some modifications but according to the scans we got right when we arrived, there are no sentient life forms."
"That seems odd." Desmond narrowed his eyes in thought. "Any signs of civilization? Maybe they died out like the other planet."
"Our scans weren't overly detailed," Zach explained, "but there were structures. They might be like this facility we're trying to infiltrate. There could be beams like this on the other planets, waiting to grab other ships as they pass by."
"Chilling thought," Deacon muttered.
"Okay, it's good information but not useful right now." Desmond leaned back in his chair. "Focus on our current problems and we'll root out the next mystery when we have a chance. Let me know when the fighter's ready to launch. I think all eyes will be on the success of that deployment."

***

Fielding fell back away from the edge as a volley of beams flew past him. The near misses made him curse and he crouched to ensure no one could snap off a shot from a particularly high vantage point out there. The other marines around him rallied around him, each waiting on his lead.

He checked the scanner and noted they were still dealing with a large force of enemies. They must've emptied their vessels completely to field so many. A quick tally showed the Gnosis crew racked up over thirty total kills. This barely put a dent in the opposition and it certainly didn't slow them down.

The fanatics wouldn't care about who they lost. Their mission drove them on rather than survival. Some protocol told them to get off the planet so that's what they were striving to do. If it cost them every life, well … That just meant some higher-up back at their base wouldn't kill them for failing. Fear drove them as much as zeal.

The intel Admiral Reach collected during his captivity said as much.

Fighting head on isn't getting us very far. We need to change it up. They're overwhelming our position with numbers and even explosives aren't helping. The turrets are the only thing truly keeping them at bay right now.

"Lieutenant," Salina's voice filled his helmet, "I've got some bad news for you."

"Why not?" Fielding sighed. "Go for it."

"We've discovered that the beam holding us in place is also draining our power. It's likely why the enemy has swarmed us."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad," Salina replied. "We've cut nonessential systems and I've left the turrets on but we're going to have to figure something out soon. Every blast heavily taxes the generator at this point, especially since they can't recharge."

"You drop those turrets," Fielding warned, "and we'll have breach. The enemy will get on board the Gnosis. I can't hold them off with this handful of men. Not without some serious help." A boom

overhead made him wince and he checked his scanner. At least one fighter was out there somewhere, likely coming close. “Are you picking that up, Gnosis?”

“Affirmative,” Salina said. “We’re launching our own fighters in a moment to provide coverage and take that out. Perhaps we’ll be able to drive the enemy back with a squadron.”

“I hope so because right now, we’re going to have to enter the field to be effective … and that will mean putting ourselves in the line of fire.” Fielding looked at the others. “We’ll do what we have to do but take care of that fighter … even if you have to use the turret up here and drain the power faster, you don’t want that thing strafing us.”

“Understood. Good luck.”

Fielding cursed again. “You heard the fighter and you know the score. The ship’s losing power and we can’t stand up here on the hull forever. We have to get down there and start tearing through the enemy, preferably from the flank since they’re so intent on charging.”

“Which side should we go after?” Corporal Vine asked. “The Tol’An or those other guys?”

“Tol’An,” Fielding said. “We’re launching our own fighters and that might be enough to push the others back. We know these zealots won’t be deterred though so we need to chew through them as quickly as possible. Don’t hold back when we get out there, guys. Use every weapon at your disposal and blow them away.”

Sergeant Gillet spoke up, “You’ve got one use of your personal shield and a lot of armor. We’ve got the advantage with this gear so be sure to take advantage of it. Stay mobile and we’ve got this. Remember, if you need to catch your breath, you can always jump back on the ship and take cover for a moment.”

“Just know,” Fielding added, “that every moment you spend flying around over the trees makes you an interesting target for someone not currently engaged.” He saw the enemy fighter now, flying low and coming in fast. “We’re out of time. Follow my lead, men. I’ll see you down there.”

Fielding engaged his jump pack and burst away from the ship, firing his weapon at the crowds below him. They blurred by as he entered

the forest, making mild adjustments to avoid smacking into a tree. As he landed, he dropped into a crouch, his feet sinking a good six inches into the soil.

Spinning in place, he saw dozens of enemies pressing on the Gnosis, firing practically at random toward the different portholes where security personnel took cover and shot back. He took aim and fired, moving as he pulled the trigger. A body jerked in response, dropping to the ground in a pool of blood.

Another one went down from a burst to the back but the sound finally drew the attention of those Fielding attacked. They turned to meet them, rushing to take cover behind larger trees. As the other marines landed around him, they laid into their opponents, tearing through their cover with sustained fire.

The Tol'An forced broke and ran for the Gnosis, taking fire from the security forces as well as the other enemies on the other side. Some went toward the north and a couple plunged deeper into the forest of the south. Marines gave chase, trying to take advantage of the route. Fielding knew it wouldn't last.

Without the power armor, the Tol'An could slip around the different obstacles and lose themselves in the thicker parts of the foliage.

A beam skimmed his right shoulder, narrowly missing. He used his jump jets, hopping ten feet to the left and lifting his weapon to take a shot at whoever nearly got him. His HUD didn't pick anyone up immediately but he saw three Tol'An breaching security at one of the open ports on the Gnosis.

Are you kidding me? The struggle only took a moment and Fielding couldn't even respond before the Tol'An finished off their defenders and tossed them outside. "Gnosis!" He shouted into his com. "Intruder alert! Three Tol'An breached the ship defenses on the starboard side! Get security personnel in position to repel. Repeat: you have boarders!"

"Understood," Salina replied, still sounding deathly calm. It annoyed Fielding, who was hoping for a little more passion out of the woman. "I'm redirecting armed personnel to assist. Thank you for the warning. Please continue with your operation and report back any further

challenges."

Further challenges?! Fielding grunted, moving off to find the next batch of enemies to engage. He checked his scanner before hopping toward the north where another large group congregated. They were laying down suppressive fire on the other group, which still had yet to be identified. Here we go … Let's cause some more chaos in this mess.

Fielding took aim and depressed the trigger, ripping into a target who stood out in the open, firing his weapon wildly. One shot caught him in the side but a personal shield flared, saving his life for a brief moment. The second bullet popped him in the head, sliding neatly through his defenses and killing him in an instant.

The others turned but when they saw the power armor, they made a break for it and ran toward a nearby hill. Fielding killed three of them during their retreat but one turned and hurled a grenade in his direction. He popped his jump jets but the explosive went off moments after he left the ground.

The concussion knocked him to the side and he rocketed horizontally for twenty yards before sliding in the ground into a tree. He sat still for a moment, looking over his HUD for a damage report. He came away uninjured but one of his thrusters had been clogged up. He needed to vent it before it would be useful again but he didn't know if he had time.

Enemy forces converged on his position. They would be on him within two minutes. Fielding crawled to his feet to prepare for the fight, moving behind a tree for some extra cover and aiming in their direction. Come on, boys. I've got something for you over here. If you think I'm a higher-value target than the ship, then I'm doing my job. Let's do this.

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Chapter 4

Flying Officer Alicia Quinn didn't mind risky missions. She thrived on danger, which compelled her to join the military in the first place. Joining the Gnosis gave her the opportunity to test her skills as a pilot while serving a cause greater than an aerial performance show. If they didn't have so many rules, she would've been in heaven.

She never anticipated real combat when she signed up. Someone anticipated action but most of her peers figured they would be running scout missions and checking out alien planets. Pitting herself against unknown enemies never even crossed her mind but when it happened, she didn't shy away.

Once she proved herself to be capable beyond reckless, her squadron leader Dennis Arden put some trust in her. She was chosen to launch from the Gnosis in the midst of a crisis, one which might mean she didn't make it far before immediately crashing. After being dragged from orbit to the surface, command believed it would ground anything that tried to leave.

Then the enemy fielded a ship so all theories became null and void Alicia believed she'd make it outside and have the opportunity to engage in a little dogfighting even before her peers could get out there with her. Flying sounded better than sitting around waiting for enemies to get inside the Gnosis and engage in a firefight. Her marksman skills weren't bad but she preferred to do her shooting in the air.

"Mustang Five," Gnosis control said, "you are clear to launch when ready. Godspeed."

"I'm ready." Alicia grinned, engaging the throttle and lurching toward the exit. Her engines worked so she figured she'd at least stay airborne for a while. The moment sunlight graced her hull, she pulled up on the stick and climbed away from the trees and coasted some distance over the forest.

Her scanner picked up the enemy ship. It needed to cover another twenty miles before it would be in firing range of the Gnosis,

practically a heartbeat considering how fast fighters traveled. Alicia adjusted her course to intercept, leveling out to cover some distance. The air currents felt much like Earth's so the only challenge would be destroying her opponent.

Thirty seconds after she remained aloft, the other ships committed to joining her. The rest of her squadron would be out of the ship in less than three minutes and their overwhelming numbers would hopefully drive the enemy ground forces off. A few strafing runs tended to put a dampener on morale and even the most zealous attackers might bolt.

Another set of blips appeared on the scanner and Alicia clicked her tongue. "Gnosis Control, our invader has some company but they're still a ways out. I estimate … five minutes before they'll be able to cause any real trouble."

"Roger that, Mustang Five. Your reinforcements should be there shortly."

"I'll tell them to hurry if they want in on this action." Alicia engaged her afterburners and reinforced her front shields. The enemy seemed to be on a collision course and she wondered if he meant to play chicken. It's been a while since I've done something like this. Squadron Leader Arden doesn't like games. But just this once, I think he might forgive me.

Beams flashed from the enemy's cannons and Alicia tilted her fighter, allowing the attacks to pass around her. Another volley required her to drop below and the enemy passed by in a blur. Jamming the reverse thrusters and wrenching the flight stick back, Alicia threw herself into a sharp climb.

The force of the maneuver pressed her into the seat, clenching her bones and squeezing her torso. She leveled out with a good firing solution on her target, above and behind their vessel. Her targeting computer began chiming and it found tone, the reticle turning red just a half moment before she pulled the trigger.

Alicia's ship vibrated as the guns blasted away, followed by her own beam weapons. Shields around the ship's engines flickered from the tapping of metal but when the energy connected with it, static danced over the hull of the vessel. The enemy pilot dove suddenly, heading

straight for the ground.
Did I do enough damage to cause a crash? Alicia doubted it. Full strength shields should've been enough to protect against a single volley. More likely, the pilot simply needed to escape another blast but she gave chase, quickly catching up. Another spray of her guns caught the shields again, this time making them turn white. I wonder what that means.
Alicia's scanner wouldn't return information about the damage to the enemy ship. Rapidly approaching the ground, she didn't have time to worry about it. The enemy pulled up with less than two hundred feet to go. She climbed as well but couldn't keep her advantageous position without flying through a couple trees.
Veering off in the opposite direction, her scanner showed the other ship heading north, away from the Gnosis. At least I made him flee … for now. Alicia spun around to pursue but the other ships were much closer. She counted five in total. If their buddy rejoined them, they'd be evenly matched.
"Gnosis control," Alicia said, "this is Mustang Five. Will I be getting any backup soon?"
Dennis Arden's voice came over the radio, "I thought you said something about how we needed to hurry if we wanted in on the action." The other ships joined her, forming up. "That implied you had it all under control."
"Uh huh," Alicia muttered. "Sir, something's odd about the scans. I didn't see your ships on it until just now."
Dennis hummed. "Gnosis control, can you please look into potential sensor glitches? We're going to be a little busy for the next little bit."
"I think you might have more problems than you think," Salina replied. "We'll get Charger out there shortly as well. Looks like more ships incoming."
"I guess they must've held them in reserve," Alicia said. "Cause they could've blown each other up a long time ago at this rate. Something prevented them from killing each other. I think we should probably be worried."
"Truth." Dennis sighed. "Alright folks, let's see what we can do about

this first wave and prepare for the second. Engage."

***

Heat took the lead for the group as they headed south away from the Gnosis. They gave the marines a heads-up they were on the verge of departing the ship, allowing their allies to lay down some suppressive fire. Dropping a ramp, they hustled down and through the nearby treeline. Security personnel secured the ramp and locked the ship back up.

Traveling downhill, they found themselves on a natural path barely large enough for them to go single file. The sounds of combat faded behind them, turning into a muffled noise off in the distance. Heat kept his weapon at the ready, head on a swivel. He got them moving west as soon as the area leveled out and picked up the pace to double time.

Vincent and Cassie huffed behind him, clearly not used to such a trek. That didn't surprise the grizzled marine but Gil Vaedra seemed to be fine. He carried on as if he tromped through the wilderness on a near daily basis. Gorman took up the rear and Heat could tell from his grunts he was annoyed by the others.

They're the ones who'll do the heavy lifting when we get there, Heat reminded himself. We have to respect their strengths, especially when they're showing their weaknesses.

"I know these trees …" Cassie said between breaths. "They're so familiar to me. I saw them on scans but in person … it's amazing … This could be any national park back home."

"I know," Vincent replied. "I was thinking the same thing. I feel like we need to grab a sample before we head back to the ship."

"We're not equipped for samples," Heat said. "And we don't know what would happen if we start hacking into the foliage so let's leave it alone, okay? The primary mission is the facility and that's what we're focusing on. Anything else is a distraction we can't afford. Do you all agree?"

"You would not learn anything anyway," Gil added. "These trees …

much like your Earth trees … like our Pahxin trees. They are for making the atmosphere livable. They make it so we can survive on different worlds."
"Who planted them?" Vincent asked. "You make it seem like one particular species did it."
"Perhaps. Perhaps a collective." Gil hummed, shrugging his shoulders. "Part of my life's work is finding out the answer to that question but I can tell you this much. A single culture visited many worlds throughout the cosmos and they had a profound impact on many of them. We believe they might've started at one world and built the others."
Cassie coughed a couple times before responding. "Do you mean like terraforming?"
"Yes, something like that." Gil chuckled. "I would not be at all surprised if you and I were siblings under the skin … ultimately from the same stock evolved through a slightly different ecosystem literally across the expanse of stars."
"Creepy," Gorman muttered.
"Do you truly think so?" Gil asked. "I find it … somewhat pleasant. It means we are predestined to help each other."
Heat grunted. "If it's anything like our own planet, brothers and sisters sometimes end up killing each other. Wars between family members are not uncommon."
"I choose to focus on the positive," Gil replied. "But I understand your point of view. As a soldier, this would be the natural way for you to think of such a thing. Our warriors are the same way. I'm sure you have met them at this point. They are severe and stern, disciplined and harsh. Much like you."
"Um … thanks?" Gorman quipped.
Gil sighed. "I meant no disrespect. There are places for all people in society. The strong, the weak, the smart and the foolish. When we are able to put each person where they belong, they thrive. We complement each other's abilities while bolstering our flaws. When a community acts together, they are literally unstoppable."
"Nice words," Heat said. "But they aren't overly realistic. You know

that. Look at where we found you. Those thugs weren't exactly helping you out."
"No," Gil replied. "There are always villains in the world. But then we have heroes like you to trounce them … or at least intervene when they attempt to do something horrible."
"Lucky us." Heat held up his hand for them to stop. He listened carefully, checking his computer for a quick scan. Nothing showed up and he continued on. "Time to be quiet everyone. I'll let you know when we can speak again. Unless you see an enemy or fall down a hole, focus on breathing and moving forward. We've got a long way to go."
"Fabulous," Cassie muttered. "And I thought we'd been walking for a while already."
"Not really," Gorman said. "In fact, this rodeo just got started. Next stop, ancient alien facility, potential automated defenses and some kind of unknown that probably wants to murder us all. No pressure at all, folks. Seriously! We can probably all relax right now and have a freakin' barbecue."
"Silence meant you too," Heat barked. "Now shut it! I don't need belly aching all the way there."

***

Desmond joined Salina at her station, leaning over to look at the scanner. He heard her confirm the intruder alert message and she directed security into position to repel them. Whether they were successful or not remained to be seen. Would three invaders be enough to cause real trouble?
I guess we're about to find out. Desmond returned to his station and hit his com, setting it to shipwide communications. "Gnosis, this is the captain speaking. We have three Tol'An soldiers aboard the ship. They have breached one of our entry points and are somewhere around deck seventeen. Security personnel is engaging but keep your eyes open.
"Do not engage if you are unarmed. Call in sightings and ensure you

remain safe."

The Tol'An heard the message but Desmond didn't care. A single mistake would reveal their presence and give the hunters a chance to deal with them. Scans wouldn't help, they were too physically similar to humans. However, if they attempted to tamper with a system or commit sabotage, security would be warned immediately.

The elevator made a sound and Desmond spun to see who was coming. Two security personnel stepped off, each carrying firearms which they handed out. They locked the area down, ensuring the enemy would not make it to the bridge, not without explosives and climbing gear.

Outside, the battle raged on. The Gnosis cameras couldn't get a good view of the action but they occasionally saw power armor sail through the air, landing amidst blasts of beam weapons. Com chatter behind them gave a good indication of the action. As the body count increased, the big challenge remained with the men inside the ship.

"They seem to be falling back," Lieutenant Fielding said. "I think we're getting a brief reprieve."

Salina replied, "I believe they are hoping to see what happens with the fighters. Fall back to the Gnosis and go on overwatch. We need to prevent any additional enemies breaching our defenses and getting aboard."

Desmond turned to his own computer and scanned through the various department reports, looking for anything that might indicate a sighting. Nothing showed up and he wondered what the Tol'An hoped to accomplish. Did they want a power cell? Were they planning on trying to take the entire ship with only three guys?

This makes little sense but then again, they aren't exactly in their right minds. Desmond rubbed his chin, eyes narrow. The hangar. The assets stored there might be of some value to their own ship. Resources for repair, tools and the means to transport them back, all in one convenient location.

He sent a private message out to all department heads and the security personnel, letting them know his concern. Hangar control replied that they put men on every entrance and locked down the doors and

maintenance access points. There were two but only one would allow them to launch anything thanks to the forest.
We might slow them down with that but the Tol'An doesn't know what we did. They might still go for the hangar … which could work to our advantage. Desmond turned his attention to the repairs of the ship, noting that engineering continued to make good progress. If Vincent shuts the beam off, looks like we'll be able to get out of here after all.
The thought shouldn't have felt pessimistic but somehow, it felt dark. Desmond's crew operated with discipline and efficiency. Considering what happened, they didn't have any reports of insubordination or even any real panic. Perhaps none of them recognized the severity of the situation … or what it might mean to be stuck there.
We might easily turn into the Tol'An or those mercenaries. Desmond turned to Salina. "Have you been able to raise either side on the coms? Now that they're withdrawing, maybe we can have a chat."
"I'll try with the mercenaries again," Salina replied. "They were ignoring my hails before but now that they've been given a bloody nose, they might feel more inclined to chat."
"I hope so." Desmond sighed. "Lord, you'd think people who fight for money would be more inclined to communicate. It costs money to throw soldiers at a problem, to waste resources on a pointless assault. When and if they reply, let me know right away. I'll see if I can talk some sense into them … or at least stave off the next assault."

***

Chief Engineer Nathaniel Webber noted Captain Bradford's warning about intruders and rolled his eyes in frustration. If it's not one thing, it's another. He ensured the security personnel protecting his section knew the importance of their jobs before he threw himself back into his own. Technicians busied themselves all around him, working feverishly.
I have to find a way to slow the power drain. Webber approached Thayne and tapped him on the soldier. The Pahxin didn't look up from

his terminal but merely made a grunt noise. “How’s it coming? Have you figured out what’s happening yet?”
“As we expected, the beam is siphoning the energy and storing it somewhere in the facility.” Thayne pointed at his screen but the characters didn’t make any sense to Webber. “This is the ratio we’re losing energy. I’ve shielded several of the generators, which is helping to reduce the flow. I may have bought us thirty minutes and I’m working on more.”
“Better than I anticipated.” Webber turned toward the hyperdrive module and sighed. “How badly is this impacting other systems? Is it causing any damage?”
Thayne shook his head. “Not at all. In fact, had it not been for the speed of our crash, I don’t think we would’ve experienced any damage. This odd system was designed to pull us down with minimal damage. Why the power drain? I’m thinking it is meant to keep us here. Imprisonment of sorts.”
“To what end?”
Thayne turned to him, brows furrowed. “Study?”
“Well, that’s just chilling.” Webber sighed. “Keep up the good work, Thayne. I’m going to be over here with people who don’t have the same experience you do with terrifying alien races.”
“At least they don’t seem to be here anymore,” Thayne called after him. “Which means they can’t come in and kidnap us all when the lights go out.”
Webber shook his head. I do not need that kind of terror while I’m trying to work. He thought back to the old fears concerning alien contact, when space travel involved orbiting the planet and a jaunt to the moon. People made up stories about little gray aliens that abducted humans for ghoulish experiments.
Would they encounter such a thing on this planet?
The Tol’An and those other jack asses aren’t being dissected somewhere so I think we’re probably safe.
A gunshot in the hall made Webber jump and he rushed to the door, tapping on the panel to ensure it was locked. The screen beside it showed the hallway beyond. One of the guards was down and the

other took cover near the corner. Shifting the viewing angle, Webber saw shapes approaching slowly.
“What’s going on out there?” Webber called into the com. “What are you seeing?”
The remaining guard pressed his finger to his lips and gestured toward the corner. The man glared at the camera for a moment before returning his attention to the approaching enemies. Shit! Webber changed the com channel and got on the security net. “Mayday. This is engineering. We have multiple intruders in this section approaching our door. Guard down.”
“We’re reading you,” came a reply. “Hold tight. We’re on our way.”
Hurry! Webber kept the comment to himself but he wanted to shout it. He watched as three individuals crept up toward the door. The Gnosis guard held his ground and the moment the first of the intruders revealed himself, he took a bullet to the side of the head. Blood splattered the wall as the body collapsed in a heap.
The other two began shooting, firing beam weapons at the corner. They didn’t hit anything but the guard was forced to fall back. As he moved, one of the Tol’An dove forward, landing on his side. He took brief aim and fired, blasting the guard in the stomach. A second shot burnt his face and the man dropped to the ground dead.
“They killed our guard!” Webber shouted into the com. “They’re trying to get in!”
“We’re almost there.” The security man’s voice remained far too calm in Webber’s opinion. “Please relax and wait for our arrival. We will not let you down, sir. Keep the door locked and ensure no one tries to leave. You’re secure in there, especially if the last of our intruders are in your section.”
Webber looked around and found every technician gathered around. Only Thayne continued to work. He thought about sending them back to their stations but he held his tongue. They wouldn’t be able to concentrate until the threat was eliminated so he let them watch on the viewscreen with him.
The Tol’An soldiers approached the door and knocked a couple times before fiddling with the panel. Those bastards think they can hack

their way in? There's no way! Is there? Webber checked the security protocol and put in his own private code to keep it locked down. No one should've been able to access the room without his biometrics at that point.

But that's what hacking is all about! One of the Tol'An accessed his personal computer and began running a program that hit hundreds of passwords over the course of ten seconds. I'm glad that's not how we secure this but damn it, security! Hurry your asses up! These guys might get lucky!

A burst of gunfire made Webber wince and one of the Tol'An took several rounds to the side and head. His personal shield stopped the first couple bullets but three tossed him against the wall. He slid down, smearing the blood already painted on the metal. The other man darted off, leaving his companion to die. The hack stopped.

Several Gnosis security appeared on the camera. One checked the downed guards, another examined the bodies of the Tol'An. "There's one left!" Webber heard the words but he had no idea who said them. "He must've gone that way! Alpha, Bravo, get down the hall. Zeta will secure this area. Move out! Get this guy!"

They began racing about and six men took their place in front of the engineering door. Webber let out a sigh of relief and turned to the others gathered around him. "Okay, there's nothing left to see here. They took care of the immediate threat. I'll put in a report to the captain but you guys get back to work."

The technicians filed away, looking concerned. Webber ran his hand over his head before dialing in Captain Bradford. The Tol'An likely felt they could take the whole ship by gaining control of engineering and it wasn't a bad plan. They could've turned up the heat, shut down entire sections and made it difficult to communicate.

If they wanted to hold the entire place hostage, that would've done the trick.

***

Desmond listened to the report from Webber, scowling through it.

Security put in a report as well, letting him know two of the intruders were dead and being taken to medical. The last one was still loose but he wouldn't get too far. The entire ship was on high alert and someone would stop them soon enough.

I swore they were going for the hangar but they genuinely thought they could take the whole ship. Desmond shook his head. I need to stop underestimating their ambition and what they think they're capable of.

The security personnel stated they planned on locking down the medical bay where they stowed the bodies. It made sense to consider that the lone Tol'An may try to reach his dead companions, especially if they had something he could use to continue his mischief. Not that he had much of an opportunity anymore.

"Captain," Salina said, "our people are making good time to the facility but they still have a ways to go. Pilots are just about to engage the larger force as well. Marines report that the ground forces have fallen back so we've got some breathing room there. Lieutenant Fielding is making a recommendation to press the assault on the Tol'An."

Desmond considered the request. On one hand, it made sense to hit them hard. They'd be back for sure if not but there was a major risk in letting the marines leave the area. Without them outside, the Gnosis would be susceptible to another breach. Even with the different hatches locked down, it stood to reason more troops might get in. But if they didn't take a chance, they'd be continually on the defensive. Of course, a little patience might give the pilots a chance to take out their opposition then hit the enemy ships with a few strafing runs and missiles. If the Gnosis held air superiority, they could suppress their attackers for as long as they still had power.

Of course, a compromise might work out the best. The marines were highly maneuverable and they could at least give the Tol'An pause when it came to another attack. Desmond clicked on the com to address Lieutenant Fielding directly, to offer an assessment of their options.

"I understand you want to press the attack," Desmond said.

“Yes, sir,” Fielding replied. “We can make them combat ineffective if we go after them right away.”
“What if you hit them from afar but remain close to the Gnosis?” Desmond asked. “If you can do some damage from nearby, then you can also help our ground crew arrive at the facility. I think that might be the best use of your time and resources. Especially with the pilots overhead.”
“When the ships are done, they can support us,” Fielding agreed. “We’ll do what we can without departing too far. Are you okay with a little latitude on these instructions?”
“Go ahead, Lieutenant,” Desmond replied. “I’ll trust your judgement. Just keep the primary objective in mind: hold the Gnosis at all costs.”
“Understood. Fielding out.”
Desmond leaned back, hoping he made the right call. The young marine knew his tactics and understood the gravity but he was also hot for action. That might translate to something positive or it could backfire dramatically. If they lost any of the power armor out there, they’d be at a significant disadvantage during another attack.
And that’s exactly what I’m afraid of. But no risk no reward. This man knows his job. I need to let him do it.

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Chapter 5

Dennis spun in place, climbing with his afterburners engaged. A series of energy blasts blew past him, despite his fancy maneuvers. The enemy remained all over him, even as he dodged and banked, pulling out every trick in his arsenal. He sensed the desperation in the assault, the need to survive through his death.

I've flown against plenty of Tol'An now but this is different. I wouldn't call him elite so much as totally reckless.

"You've got quite a problem," Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring spoke up. "I think I've got a solution."

"I hope it's good," Dennis called out as his shields flared around him. Heat filled the cockpit as the generators kicked in to provide additional power to his defenses. "This guy has it out for me in a major way."

"Almost like you owe him money," Shane replied. "I'm nearly there."

Dennis knew what his second was doing. He tried to give him a moment of levity to alleviate the stress of the situation, to keep him from thinking about the level of danger. The fact he was the object of the placating tone gnawed at his stomach. It meant Shane saw something he did not and that worried him.

Another series of shots caught Dennis' shields and this time, they dropped down to ten percent. He dove, heading toward the ground in a maneuver he saw Alicia use once. He had to admit, she was a better flyer overall, but he figured all it would take was nerves and a steady hand to pull up at the last moment.

He closed in on the trees, the green growing all around him. His altimeter showed he was rapidly approaching the surface and at three hundred feet, he pulled up, hitting his boosters. Unfortunately, it didn't work and his opponent took another shot at him, narrowly missing.

"I thought you were nearly here," Dennis grunted. "Hurry up, Shane!"

"I am nearly there," Shane replied. "And … bank left, please."

Dennis wrenched his stick and banked as requested just as his

wingman's guns came to life. A couple volleys of mass driving cannons tore into the enemy ship and clipped its wing, sending it sailing off to the left. A little relief went a long way and Dennis leveled out before banking to find a firing solution on the pilot that nearly killed him.
"Mayday," Lieutenant Hal Brown, Mustang Three, called out the message. "I cannot shake this guy!"
"I've got him," Alicia spoke up and Dennis craned his neck just in time to see her blast one of the enemies in the side, blowing through his shields and cutting into the hull. The target began to dive, smoke billowing out of the tail just a moment before the ship exploded with a resounding pop.
"Yeah!" Hal shouted. "Great work! Thank you!"
"Don't get too excited," Alicia replied. "Another two of them are coming around."
Dennis caught sight of his own target and tried to line up a shot but the bastard was bouncing around like he'd caught on fire. His targeting computer continued to struggle so he decided to eyeball it, pulling the trigger. Guns barked as he tried to lead the enemy but the maniac hit his top thrusters, casting his ship down and out of the way. Wings visibly strained at the sudden motion against the wind, but the fighter held together.
Shane's cannons lit up, bolts cutting through the air but once again, the enemy pilot spun and climbed, making a wild move that saved him.
Dennis struggled to keep his advantage but staying on the Tol'An's tail was like holding a writhing snake. It required all his concentration and the computer simply could not get a lock. This won't need one. He fired a missile, giving it some space to work. The projectile lurched forward and suddenly veered, going right for the thrusters of its target.
The Tol'An hit his afterburners, flying off to the north. Dennis checked the scanner and found three more fighters causing trouble nearer to the Gnosis. Following the lone ship felt like a bad idea, a distraction they couldn't afford. He'd be back if the missile didn't finish him off but he'd be up against overwhelming odds.

I suppose they do want to save their own skins sometimes. Dennis banked and headed back to the rest of his wing.
Shane followed his lead, but asked, “Why did we let him go?”
“He’s one guy,” Dennis said. “We have to clean up the mess back here.”
“You know he’ll be back though.”
“And when he returns,” Dennis replied, “He’ll find it a lot harder to dodge six to twelve fighters taking shots at him. Hurry. I don’t want lucky shots to cause trouble for the Gnosis.”

***

Desmond watched the battle over the ship with their fighters. He started out in that capacity, flying in a war that seemed a lifetime ago. Watching them struggle with the wily target made him yearn for his own time behind a flight stick. His skills had long since atrophied but knowing the stakes of this particular struggle brought out an urge he fought against.
I want to join them.
They chased it off and returned to the fray, laying into the other ships. Those enemy pilots did not have the skill of their cunning squad mate and though they performed well, they were no match for two-to-one odds. Even with a few lucky shots, they failed to take down any of the mustang pilots.
The first of the three took a full volley of gunfire from multiple sources, one near the thrusters and the other along the cockpit. Shields burst in a spectacular blue flash and the front burst into flames. It crashed into a hillside, smoke billowing a hundred feet into the sky. No one could’ve survived the explosion and Desmond didn’t see an ejection pod.
The next tried to ram one of the Gnosis pilots but a casual climb and roll saved them. Desmond identified the friendly as Mustang Five, Alicia Quinn. He’d been reading about her flying and recognized her as one that Squadron Leader Arden called reckless and incredibly talented.

She makes it look absolutely effortless, that's for sure.
Mustang formed up to deal with the final ship as it tried to flee the area. Desmond checked and found nothing else on the scanners, no other vessels. They weren't necessarily to be trusted after the strange glitches since arriving on the planet but for the moment, it seemed accurate.
Mustang One confirmed they had no other visual targets. The six of them barreled down upon their final target, harassing him with beam weapons and mass driver cannons. Despite some pretty fancy maneuvers, the Tol'An ship couldn't survive the constant barrage from superior firing solutions.
A last ditch climb earned the pilot a full brunt of blaster fire to the top of the vessel, eliminating the shields and cutting the craft in half. One part spun off to the left and the front exploded in a spectacular orange cloud that quickly dissipated. Mustang reported the destruction and leveled out, returning to the skies closer to the Gnosis.
"Captain," Salina said, "Mustang is requesting permission to attack the downed enemy vessels."
"Have we still not been able to get the mercenaries on the com?" Desmond asked.
"Not as of yet."
Desmond sighed, considering the options. Attacking the Tol'An didn't bother him. They weren't going to be reasonable regardless of the situation but the others might still come around. Fighting soldiers for hire felt wrong. The mercenaries only attacked the Gnosis because they were desperate and knew they were under a heavy time constraint.
Small devices seemed to survive the power drain so they aren't without the means to survive at least. But even if they finished the repairs, they'd be stuck here. Much like we will be if the team doesn't get into that facility soon and shut off this beam. Desmond wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve, noting the rising temperature.
"What's going on with the heat?" Desmond asked.
"Life support," Salina replied. "I've cut it to minimum in an effort to conserve power. Basically, cutting off environmental control so we're

simply processing the air and ensuring purity there."
"I hope it's working," Zach muttered. "Cause I'm sweating my ass off over here."
"Stress isn't helping," Deacon added. "Considering all that's going on."
Desmond's computer made a chime and he noted a new report from engineering. They managed to shield all the generators and slowed down the leaking process but could not stop it completely. I wonder if our enemies out there made a similar attempt. How many extra hours did they squeeze out before they found themselves in the dark?
Zach asked, "Do you think they attempted to go into the facility like we are?"
"You're reading my mind," Desmond replied. "I can't imagine they didn't try everything at their disposal in an attempt to escape this place. Of course, it depends on what sort of scientists they had on board. If they're all soldiers, there's a good chance they didn't know how to go about searching for the source of what brought them here."
"If you're a hammer," Deacon said, "every problem looks like a nail, right?"
"Pretty much." Desmond stood up and approached the screen, looking out over the landscape. "Give Mustang the go order to attack the Tol'An. Maybe we can give those zealot bastards something else to worry about besides bothering us for a few hours. And double the patrols on the ship. Our intruder must be hiding somewhere. I want him found. Now."
Before he finds a way to mess something up for real.

***

Heat heard the muffled sounds of distant explosions somewhere off to the west, somewhere beyond the facility. He saw smoke drifting in the air, much like the aircraft that had been shot down during the aerial battle. Gunfire slowed, giving the forest a temporarily tranquil feeling. That won't last long with so many soldiers running around out here.
Heat hummed, glancing back at the others in his little party. Gorman and Gil were still the only ones who didn't look like they'd been put

through a ringer. The computer suggested the temperature pushed thirty degrees Celsius, which explained why everyone was so miserable.

Figures we'd land on a planet during the summer. Though I guess heat's better than cold. Kind of. Heat paused. "Hydrate really fast then we'll pick up the pace again. We don't have time to slow down too much but we won't do anyone good if we don't take care of some basics."

"Thank you," Cassie spoke through heavy breaths. "I've done some serious marching in my time, I've even run in horrible weather but this … this is crazy."

"The air," Gil said, "it is not what you're used to. Yes, it's perfectly safe but I can see why you might be having a hard time."

"You sure it ain't just the heat?" Gorman asked. "Because I'm not suffering much."

"Possibly," Gil replied. "Though the scans do indicate this place is mildly different than Earth."

Heat took a drink and stuffed his canteen back in his pack and motioned with his head. "That's it for the break, let's pick up the pace."

Gnosis fighters passed by overhead, flying in a loose formation. Where the hell are you guys going? Heat figured they must be on their way to attack one of the two downed vessels. It seemed like a sound tactic but probably unnecessary. The marines would likely kill any other resources the two sides could throw at them.

They weren't prepared for some real opposition. Heat frowned at the thought, unsure of why the mercenaries or Tol'An would underestimate the newcomer. Maybe each of them thought they could arrive in time to catch us while we were still off guard.

Another series of explosions erupted off to the west before the fighters came back. Whatever they set out to do, they must've accomplished. The sortie didn't take long and they commenced with a scouting pattern around the Gnosis. If they truly did hit the Tol'An capital ship, then they had succeeded in one of two things.

Either they destroyed their ability to fight entirely or they stirred them

up into such a desperate frenzy they would throw themselves at the Gnosis until they were dead to the last man. Intelligence showed the zealots would do anything it took to get a task done, up to and including sacrificing lives. This just gave them an excuse to do it quickly.

What about the other ship? Heat thought. Surely, it's time to hit them and nullify their ability to fight too.

A sound caught his attention to the left, bringing his awareness back to the moment. He lifted his weapon and signaled for the others to stop. They didn't halt immediately, a fact that made him scowl. Would've been nice if we could've just brought more marines. These others will probably get us killed if we have a real conflict.

Something moved and Heat lowered himself to a crouch, peering through his scope. The scanner didn't pick anything up and it might've been an animal. Was it some kind of terrifying predator looking for lunch? If so, he hoped it would be alone and small enough to not take a man down with a single bound.

"What's up?" Gorman's voice startled Heat but he didn't jump. His fellow marine moved so quietly, he missed his approach. "What did you see?"

"Movement," Heat whispered. "To my left about twenty yards ahead."

"Animal?"

"Don't know." Heat peered around the area, hoping for a sign that might reveal what they were dealing with. Another stick broke and he heard someone curse. "Definitely not an animal."

"An idiot." Gorman sighed. "I have a feeling we just encountered some Tol'An."

Heat looked over his shoulder and rasped, "weapons ready. We've got contact just up ahead." The others readied their guns and Heat shook his head. "Be sure not to shoot us, please. Aim away and only fire if you have a clear shot. I'm not interested in any friendly fire today and you sure as hell can't afford to carry us back to the ship."

"Understood," Vincent rasped back. "Just…"

Before the commander could finish his phrase, someone darted out on the path and opened fire. The shot went high and Gorman was at the

ready, pulling the trigger and perforating his target. As the body danced backward, blood splattered the trees and people started darting about in the bushes down the path.
“Take cover!” Heat shouted, moving to his own tree to hide behind. The others complied, though he didn’t necessarily know how safe they truly were. The HUD of his power armor would give him a good idea of the opposition they faced. As it was, he guessed there were no more than five out there beside the dead guy.
Beams slapped against trees to Heat’s left and right, catching fire to the foliage. They got my number. “Gorman!” He called. “You got anyone?”
“Working on it!”
“I do!” Cassie shouted. A weapon barked, a couple well timed three round bursts erupting from the bushes where the agent took cover. Something made Heat’s cover vibrate and he smelled burning wood. Glancing up, he saw the flames climbing. It would take a couple minutes before the area wasn’t safe but they might not have that much time. Gorman returned fire as well then Vincent joined in. Gil dashed along the path and into another thick bunch of bushes, disappearing behind the leaves.
Okay, I can’t be the only one hiding here. Heat dropped down and crawled away from his cover, rolling off the path and stopping on his back. He leaned his head up, aiming his weapon along his body and taking a couple suppressive shots. A potential target moved, making the leaves rustle around him.
Scowling, he didn’t know for sure that one of his own people hadn’t moved up there to do something heroic. He fired at the ground, casting dirt several feet into the air. A Tol’An operative stood, preparing to make a break for it. Heat fired, catching the man in the head, dropping the body in an instant.
Heat crawled to his feet and rushed over to another set of trees, aiming around the larger trunk. He had a good angle on their opponents but they were dug in deep in their cover. They brought along two grenades each but he hoped to keep them in reserve for when they entered the facility should they have needed them in there.

Won't do us much good to save them if we're delayed indefinitely here. Heat grabbed one of the explosives from his pack and cooked it for a moment before tossing it at the targets. He fired his weapon to mask the sound of it landing and it worked. The Tol'An did not leave their position, even when he shouted, "Fire in the hole!"

The grenade popped, causing splinters of wood to fly in all directions. People screamed and an arm flopped into the middle of the natural path Heat had been leading his party on a few moments before. One Tol'An stumbled into the open and turned away, dropping his weapon as he went.

Heat aimed then lowered his weapon. The man's left arm was missing just below the elbow and his back was covered in gore. The zealot dropped to the ground a moment later and expired. Someone started screaming, a pitiful sound that went on and on. Heat found Gorman and made eye contact.

The two men nodded and moved up toward the sound. Heat led the way with his rifle, glancing to the left and right before they approached the site where the grenade went off. A pool of gore soaked the earth and two other dead Tol'An were sprawled there. The final one, a man missing half his face, screamed in agony.

Gorman finished him off. "We'd better look around," he said. "Make sure we're alone."

"I'm pretty sure we are," Heat replied. "And even if we're not, I say we go straight for the facility now. It's clear our people have shoved these guys back. If we hustle, we can make it there in less than twenty minutes."

"That's a lot of running for our people," Gorman warned. "They're having a hard time right now and if we encounter another bunch of these?" He shook his head. "If we're not cautious, we won't be able to handle another attack. Not so easily at least."

"We don't have time for caution, man." Heat turned and shouted for the others to join them. "Threat's gone. We really need to haul ass if we want to get to the facility while we're young. You guys up for a bit of a jaunt?"

"What kind of jaunt?" Vincent asked. "And what exactly do you mean

by that?"
"I mean hauling some ass," Heat replied. "We're going to try to get there within the next twenty minutes … before we get attacked again."
"We need to do it," Cassie said. "We can't delay ourselves out here any longer than we already have. The Gnosis doesn't have time."
Vincent turned to her. "Are you sure you're okay with a run in this? It's hotter than hell and we could end up being totally exhausted when we arrive."
"We'll work through." Cassie shrugged. "We really don't have a choice. Gil? Are you good?"
Gil nodded once. "I will be fine with whatever the team decides."
Heat smirked. "There you go. We'll double time it and get through these woods. I've got our bearing so we'll come out right where we need to be. Do whatever it takes to keep up. If we're attacked again, Gorman and I will take care of it. Just take cover and move away from the action. Our objective is to hit that facility no matter what. Understood?"
They all agreed, putting on determined expressions. Heat had seen such enthusiasm before from new recruits and fresh infantry. Those men he could fashion into hardened marines but Vincent and Cassie were bridge officers with skills practiced more than employed. He knew they were physically fit but this assignment was likely more than they should've been involved with.
"I'll take point," Heat said. "Gorman, you're second. Gil, take up the rear. Don't fall, watch your ankles and step firmly. This will be a brutal move but necessary. Believe me, if I had another option, I'd offer it. As it is, we gotta get there quick. Fall out, people! We're wrapping this travel up early."

***

Alicia watched her scanner as they approached the downed Tol'An capital ship. They were moving fast, flying barely five hundred feet above the ground. The tallest trees looked like they had the potential

to touch the bottoms of their fighters and the shockwave from their passing made the branches sway wildly.

No power seemed to emanate from their target. It was a dead chunk of metal, little more than refuge against the elements as opposed to a base of operations. Even if they hit the reactor, it wouldn't even explode. The best they could hope for was denying their enemy respite in the conflict.

If they can't resupply, they can't really attack the Gnosis again. Unless they want to employ sticks.

"Sixty seconds to target," Dennis said. "Prepare for your attack run."

Alicia checked her weapon systems. Missiles, beams and mass drivers all read fully functional and ready to rock. Six fighters delivering their full payloads would cause catastrophic damage to an unshielded, stationary target. If it was still remotely intact when they finished, she'd be surprised.

Scans pinged something on the ground, a group of troops moving through the forest. Alicia tried to gather additional details but it only stated they were on foot and humanoid. Very useful. What the heck's up with this thing right now? She assumed the beam holding the Gnosis had interfered with their sensors.

"Got movement down there," Alicia said. "Think they're friendlies?"

Shane hummed. "Could be. We've got a group moving on the facility. Best to leave them alone."

"True," Dennis confirmed. "There's no way to hit that area without causing some pretty significant damage. We cause a fire, even if they aren't our people we might impact that mission. Begin your attack run. Give this thing everything you've got then loop around for patrol. If we get the word to attack the other ship, I'd like to be in position."

The Tol'An ship crashed nose first and was jutting up into the air at an angle. Buried at least a dozen or more feet into the ground, it looked stuck. Even if they had been able to engage their engines, it didn't look possible to launch. Their defenses would've also been easy to avoid, though the turrets long since lost any power to fire.

Alicia followed Dennis's lead, plunging toward the stationary target. Soldiers poured out of the structure but they didn't even hesitate.

They just ran for the treeline as the fighters unloaded on their cover. Missiles crashed into their target just as beams melted the metal and mass drivers tore great chunks off the vessel.

Ships around her began pulling up but she held out for another few moments, laying in an additional volley. Yanking the stick back, Alicia climbed and banked around the trembling structure, flying around as it began to collapse. A beam passed by her nose and she glanced out her window, unable to see what might've taken the pot shot.

"Do they have weapons that can hit us up here?" Alicia asked. "Because that would turn this interesting really fast."

"I'm on it," Hal called, passing her by and strafing the ground. Plumes of soil launched into the air and more Tol'An fled the sinking crash site. "That should keep them busy for a minute."

"Form up and let's get out of here," Dennis said. "Glad they revealed their little toy though. Climb to ten thousand feet and provide overwatch until further notice."

Overwatch? Alicia sighed. The idea of waiting around for an attack that would never come annoyed her. The mercenaries didn't deploy fighters, only the Tol'An and they already routed their ground forces sufficiently to make any further strafing runs mostly pointless. At least we'll be able to identify incoming threats, I suppose.

They climbed, falling into a patrol pattern around the Gnosis. Nothing hit the scanners and there were no signs of enemy action in the air for miles around. If the aliens who took them down showed up, it might be a fight but otherwise, Alicia settled in for what promised to be little more than a boring session of check out the scenery.

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Chapter 6

Heat held up his hand, signaling the others to stop. They reached the edge of the trees, peering out over the open landscape between them and the facility. No soldiers appeared to be around and the scene seemed tranquil and calm. Chances were the relative peace was deceiving and they were in for a big surprise.

Cassie joined him, crouching low as she brought out her computer. He looked at her, brows furrowed and she sighed.

"I need to scan the place so we can figure out how to get inside," Cassie said. "That's why we're here, right?"

"You needed more time in a tactical school," Heat replied. "When the point person indicates to stop, it means you don't move unless directed otherwise. If there had been enemies up here, you would've potentially given away our position. Much as we want to bust into this place, I think we want to stay alive a little more."

"There's no one around," Cassie said. Her cheeks burned. "But you're right … I'm sorry."

"Don't do it again." Heat glanced back at the others. "We seem to be clear. Get ready to cross in a moment."

Vincent joined them, looking all around. Heat gave him some space, standing up to peer over the perimeter around the facility. The trees on the edge of the area hadn't been tended to in some time but the grounds themselves looked as if someone recently mowed the grass and swept the walk.

Two cement paths bisected a trimmed lawn, and stairs led up to the tall, stone building. The walls were smooth and brown without any indentation or carving in the surfaces. It stretched up a good five stories but apparently, the thing they needed was underground. That meant a basement or perhaps a higher tech facility, possibly accessed through an elevator.

The tactics of approaching the building bothered Heat. They had no intelligence about the site, no way of knowing what they were about to walk into. For all they knew, the place might be a death trap

designed specifically to murder anyone who tried to infiltrate it. Crossing the threshold without so much as a floor plan involved a massive risk.

Gil stepped forward and looked over Cassie's shoulder. He pointed at something. "The doors are definitely closed. I believe the recess will have an access panel. Providing they used Orb technology, we'll be able to access it. However, I expect it will take time. These things are rarely simple to unlock."

"How much time?" Vincent asked. "We're going to be exposed out there."

"We cannot possibly know without looking it over." Gil shrugged. "Shall we go?"

Heat sighed and nodded. "I'm still on point." He looked at Gorman. "Give me ten yards. If I don't get lit up, head out."

"And if you do?" Gorman asked, smirking.

"Then avenge me." Heat shook his head and moved on, holding his weapon at the ready.

He stepped out on the cement path and welcomed the opportunity to traverse some even ground. A sweet scent hung gently in the air, floral and pleasant. It didn't seem particularly natural but held more in common with an odor elimination product. Peering at the edges of the cement where the grass met the stone, he noted tiny grates no more than an inch wide.

Someone must be occupying this place and we just don't know it. They have to refill that stuff.

"You okay?" Gorman called and Heat scowled back at him. They remained at the treeline, watching him expectantly.

"Yes, why?"

"You stopped." Gorman shrugged.

"Just found something," Heat said, gesturing to the ground. "Signs of civilization, albeit subtle. You'll see when you get out here. Come on. I don't think anyone's going to bother us, at least not for a while."

Heat picked up the pace and approached the stairs, taking them two at a time. He paused at the top, turning to look around. The scene from the landing took his breath away. The perfection of the courtyard and

tall, thick trees felt positive and life affirming. Something must've been in that smelly stuff to make me think like this.
The others joined him and each fell silent for a few moments as they took in the place as well. Heat finally snapped out of it a good minute later and tapped Gil on the arm, gesturing for the recess where the doors stood. They were nestled neatly in the archway, twenty-feet high and made of some kind of dark metal.
"We have a problem," Gil muttered. "I do not see any access panels."
Sure enough, the rock near the door was smooth.
Cassie said, "Maybe it's hidden. We've seen that before." She approached a little too quickly for Heat's taste. Five feet before she reached the entry, the doors slid open with little more than a loud hiss. No grating metal or grinding stone, just a subtle huff as if they were gliding on air.
"Um …" Gorman scratched his head. "No one thought that would happen, right?"
"Certainly not," Vincent replied. "It makes me nervous. I feel like … like …"
"They're inviting us in?" Cassie finished for him. "It does have a welcoming feeling … if a bit ominous."
The dark passage beyond made Heat particularly nervous. They'd need to engage flashlights if they wanted to see the state of the place. If the floor had been as meticulously kept up as the courtyard, then they'd be fine but if not, then it could be a death trap. He turned to Vincent and shrugged.
"I'm deferring to you on this one, sir."
"Opinion?" Vincent asked.
"This whole mission's a huge risk." Heat gestured to the building. "We don't know what we're going to find in there but we have to go in if we want to free the Gnosis. I say we just get it over with myself."
"That what you would do if you were in charge of the mission?" Gorman interjected, "He would've already been inside shooting someone."
Heat scowled but bit his lip. "Anyway, if we don't make a choice, the doctor or agent are going to just bust in there and force our hand."

“Gil,” Vincent called. “Do you think it’s safe to go in?”
Gil nodded. “Scans indicate we are looking at favorable environmental conditions. It is cooler within than out here so I personally endorse stepping inside. Each of us has a light so we should be able to see. Shall we proceed?”
“No life forms,” Cassie added. “None that I can detect and the power source we’re after is definitely in there and below us. Maybe three floors down. We’ll know more when we get closer to it.”
“Okay.” Vincent drew a deep breath and let it out. “We’ve got this. Lights on and awareness up. We don’t know what we’re going to find in there so try to be on your toes. You’ve all heard stories about ancient temples and their traps. None of you are allowed to fall prey to one. That’s an order.”
“Yes, it is true,” Gil added. “These locations tend to be filled with some incredibly dangerous pitfalls. One of my colleagues had his spine severed by a powerful chain which whipped out of a hole in the wall, cleaving him in two. It was a spectacular and horrifying event to be sure.”
“Thanks for that vision,” Heat grumbled, stepping forward. “I’ll volunteer to be the first victim of the weed whacker defense system. Please stay a few paces behind me just in case we need room to maneuver. Believe me, the last thing we need is to be bumping into each other while trying to avoid being cut in half.”

***

Fielding’s computer gave him a warning of more incoming soldiers, this time from the mercenary side. The soldiers took refuge on the hull, staying away from the edges except to keep an eye out for intruders. Up until that point, they’d had a quiet time after their assault. After pursuing some of the enemies over the hill, no one seemed willing to try their luck again.
The Gnosis security personnel still hadn’t found the final Tol’An that infiltrated the ship. He couldn’t imagine where the bastard was hiding but if they become overly distracted by the incoming assault, he might

try to slip out. Or cause more trouble. Considering they had no idea where he might be sneaking around, it stood to reason he was looking for opportunities.

Those maintenance tunnels would be a great place to remain unnoticed.

Private First Class Marvin Singer's voice filled his helmet. "Sir, I'm seeing ten incoming … They're just beyond maximum range. Should I engage?"

Fielding considered the request for a moment and decided against it. "Negative, we have no idea if they're—"

A loud zap from off to the east interrupted him, near the large group of mercenaries. He turned in that direction and saw one of the marines lying on his back, Private Singer! The front of his armor was blackened and partially melted and a quick tap into his HUD indicated his life signs were offline.

"Get that man back!" Fielding shouted. "Get away from that edge! Did any of you see what happened?"

The marines dragged Singer's body toward the center of the Gnosis, each of them remaining low. Fielding approached, dropping prone to crawl toward the edge so he could aim his rifle over and use the camera to check out their attackers. The group stood on a small hill with a mounted weapon with a long barrel.

Heavy weapons! Damn it! It made sense. If their sole purpose was to profit from conflict, they'd have such things. He wondered why they hadn't fielded any vehicles against them but perhaps they'd been damaged in their own crash. Either way, that thing was deadly, even to the power armor.

Fielding established a com connection to the bridge as he inched backward, remaining out of sight. They could probably open a hole in the hull with that thing. I hope to God they don't have more. If they start tearing into us with our shields down, we're going to be wide open to a full-on assault. I hope the pilots are ready for another strafing run. We need it.

***

“Captain,” Salina drew Desmond’s attention away from the various reports. “I have the mercenaries on the line finally. They’ve responded and wish to speak.”
“Send it to my station,” Desmond replied. “I’ll take it privately.”
“Lieutenant Fielding also has an urgent report.”
“Take it and send it to my terminal while I talk to this other guy.”
Desmond waited until his earbud began to hiss. The built in translator automatically began working, taking the Pahxin language and converting it to English.
“Downed vessel …” The voice lacked all tone, the computer robbing it of malice or friendliness. “We are offering you one chance to surrender and grant us entry. We have heavy weapons and will begin to sheer off your exterior in a few moments. Know that we expect full and complete cooperation.”
Desmond didn’t immediately reply but turned his attention to his terminal. Salina put through the report from Fielding, confirming the enemy’s weapon. He wondered why the marines hadn’t taken them out until he saw that one of their own had already been killed. Power armor couldn’t stand up against it.
“We’d like to cooperate with you,” Desmond replied. “I don’t see any reason for us to surrender when we can help one another. I know that your ship was damaged. We have supplies and are happy to assist. There’s no need for further violence between us. I get that you were desperate but we can work this out if you’ll let us.”
Fielding’s report stated the weapon was an emplacement and thus not particularly maneuverable. His first suggestion involved an air strike from the fighters followed up by an assault by the ground forces. Desmond agreed with the assessment but wanted to try to reason with the mercenaries first.
“We are in a better position to negotiate than you are.” The voice hesitated before continuing. “You have little time to decide.”
“Our fighters are overhead,” Desmond said. “We can have them attack your positions or even go after your downed vessel if you want to play games but honestly, it makes no sense. Work with us. I guarantee you

the results will be far more positive than if we pursue further conflict."
"We believe we hold the upper hand."
Desmond sighed and muted the line. "Salina, get Mustang to hit these guys hard. They should coordinate with Fielding to ensure we remove the threat." He brought them back online. "We will not be surrendering so I guess you're going to have to see what happens if you pull that trigger out there." He killed the connection and stood up. "Do we have our turret still?"
Zach sucked a breath through his teeth and shrugged. "I'm seeing enough power for a few shots … but not much more. The power generators will take a big hit."
"I think this is what we've been saving them for," Desmond replied.
"Begging your pardon," Zach said, turning to Desmond, "but I was thinking we were saving the guns for whatever brought us down here."
Desmond paused for a moment to consider his point. Whatever alien race dragged them to the surface didn't have to be impatient. They would show up when the power was fully drained, not take a chance that a few sparks remained for firearms. No, they needed to defend themselves in the present, not worry about a potential future.
"I doubt it will matter," Desmond said, "especially if those guys tear the Gnosis apart with those heavy weapons."
Zach nodded. "I'll begin targeting now."
"Work with Mustang and the marines," Desmond added, turning to Salina. "They're all weapons free. Tell them to do whatever it takes to drive these maniacs off. Pilots are free to hit their base. We might as well give both ships a serious beating since neither side feels inclined to take on a partner."

***

Captain Ulian Hataran of the Pahxin vessel Stalwart, sat in his quarters looking over his reports. He was tasked with checking in on the Gnosis, who was overdue for a check-in by several hours. They

should've arrived in the system they were heading to and sent a message but neither Earth command nor the Pahxin defense ships had received such a communication.

After working closely during the diplomatic mission to bring the humans together with their culture, Ulian had a vested interest in helping the Gnosis. Their ship was not built for war but they fought with the spirit of true warriors, making the best of their equipment. He respected their captain and their people. They had proved themselves in many ways.

He hoped to find the Gnosis in the midst of some kind of interference or with a communications failure. Any other option would not be fair considering what the humans had survived to that point. A Tol'An raid on their home world, multiple large ships in a massive attack, Kalrawv opportunists and even making friends with the Pahxin government. Humanity's foray into space had turned eventful quickly.

Establishing diplomatic cooperation had seemed impossible to Ulian when they'd met up. Had the Tol'An not interrupted the meeting and kidnapped the delegates, any treaty might've taken months to complete, if not longer. Combat solidified their bond, violence to rescue their people. It was a camaraderie Ulian understood.

Once the diplomats settled affairs and finished ratifying a formalized document for collaboration, the Pahxin sent multiple ships to Earth. They were there not only to provide some support for their smaller, less advanced fleet but also to help them finish another, more combat oriented vessel.

When they completed the ship, they could replicate it quickly enough. The next big step involved giving their population the full story. They leaked it by degrees, building it up over the course of a couple weeks. Following the mindset of their entertainment, they established interest then divulged details until they fully came out to say humanity was working with aliens.

Ulian had seen two other cultures go through similar growing pains. The general people often became paranoid, especially when they saw that the Pahxin looked much like they did. The human government did a good job of fully informing people of what was happening and

granting them the details needed to process the information.
This didn't stop fringe groups from worrying about it though. Apparently, a couple of conspiracy theorists brought others together to speak of the dangers of collaborating with alien forces. The last report suggested they had yet to listen to reason. Even if the Pahxin were there to take over the planet, humanity could do little to stop them.
Perhaps they'll see reason when they finish a couple ships and more of their kind venture into the stars. It's easy to be close-minded when you're stuck on one planet. Travel broadens the imagination considerably.
"Sir," the computer's voice piped through the speakers on his desk. "We are rapidly approaching the entry point into the system. Defense systems are online and weapons are at the ready. Do you have any further orders before we emerge from hyperspace?"
"No," Ulian replied. "I will be on the bridge momentarily. Thank you."
Ulian paused to look over his computer screen for just another moment, frowning at the coordinates they were approaching. Pahxin intelligence labeled this particular system as hazardous ages ago but there was no information as to why. It wasn't forbidden and civilian ships passed through frequently.
Of course, none of them were looking for artifacts interesting to the Tol'An. Why did those zealots mark this location as so strategically important to them? Surely, they didn't have the peace of mind to create false intelligence within their network on the off chance someone would steal it? Such a trap seemed unlike them and far too clever.
I will not believe them capable of something so devious. They never imagined we would find their secret base. This tip was a good one and the Gnosis followed a solid lead. When we arrive, we'll probably learn why they wanted it so badly and also discover why they did not have it yet.
Ulian left his quarters and headed down the glistening, silver-walled corridor to the elevator. Crewmen moved about him, rushing here and there as they came close to leaving hyperspace. A general tension

filled the air. Everyone knew they were about to emerge into a potentially dangerous situation.

Most of them were veterans, the type of men and women who knew how to handle themselves in the toughest of circumstances. They'd been through real fights, and a couple of small skirmishes that others would call wars. Ulian watched some of them grow from fresh recruits into the capable, experienced soldiers they had become.

And we might need all their skills in this endeavor. This isn't hitting an outpost or a straightforward sweep of pirates. Trundling into the unknown tends to be the worst kind of exciting and I suppose that's what the general tension is all about.

Ulian boarded the elevator and a moment later stepped onto the bridge. The screen was still down and the ship's hull vibrated ever so slightly as they continued on their course through hyperspace. He sat in his chair, logging into the terminal attached to the arm. Once he had full control, he established a shipwide communication.

"Stalwart Crew," Ulian said, "we are about to emerge from hyperspace to check on the human ship Gnosis. We do not know exactly what we will find their but it is important to note that we may find an attack force or some sort of alien technology preventing communications. I ask of you to perform at your best and ready yourselves for combat.

"I do not rule out the possibility that we will be stumbling upon a large combat force. Do not be alarmed. If I deem our vessel incapable of handling the odds, we will have a course plotted back out of here so we can establish reinforcements and return. However, something tells me we can handle ourselves. I am sure you feel the same.

"Our greatest strength is one another and the skills we have all developed to the point of expertise. I believe in you and know you will do your best in this mission and whatever crops up to challenge us. Stand firm, do your duty and we will all return home with another successful operation in our records. Thank you."

Ulian's bridge crew worked with him on three different ship assignments, coming out to five tours of duty. They were a finely honed unit and became close friends as well. When heading into battle or especially the unknown, he felt all the more confident in their

survival having them on board.
Erda Walar worked as the helmsman, in charge of weapons, piloting and navigation. He was a shorter man with jet black hair and excessively pale skin. Even on shore leave, he rarely got outdoors much. His family served on a space station where he was born and he never felt the pull to planet side life that other people might've.
Tech and coms were handled by Viran Des, a genius with computers who graduated in the top three percent of his class. Tall and spindly, he wore his blond hair practically shaved and tended to be introverted during social functions. One would never know he kept quiet while he worked on the bridge. He and Erda operated together on several assignments.
Morala Crelden acted as Ulian's first officer. She carried herself in a stern way, acting as the liaison for the other departments throughout the ship. Her previous assignment had been as a ground soldier and when she accepted the promotion and change of venue, she brought considerable discipline to the role. She was red-haired, blue-eyed and usually all business.
Ulian had seen her cut loose a couple times but it tended to be rare.
"Emerging from hyperspace," Erda said. "Count of three … two … one …"
The ship hummed around them for the briefest of moments before the screen flickered on. Viran tapped loudly at his terminal while Morala received reports from the rest of the ship. Ulian waited patiently, peering at the emptiness of space before them. They were on the edge of the system, far enough out that most of the planets would be small without magnification.
Viran said, "Sir, I'm picking up a large ship not even ten-thousand kilometers away."
"Is it the Gnosis?" Ulian asked.
"No, sir. It seems to be …" Viran paused. "Of alien origin. I have no matching silhouettes in our database. It appears to be powering up."
Ulian tapped the arm of his chair thoughtfully. "Continue your scans for the Gnosis but also get me a full reading on that ship. Erda, put our shields up and bring the weapons online. I'd rather be safe than

sorry. Pilots at the ready. Hold on launching the fighters until we know they'll be effective."
"Am I holding here, sir?" Erda asked.
"Yes. We'll let them come to us." Ulian leaned forward. "Viran, hail them when they close in. Will that give you time for the scans we need?"
"They're automated and running. When the results are back, I'll be warned."
Morala leaned close. "All stations report functional. Engineering is on standby if we go to battle. Pilots were already in the hangar and are boarding their ships now. They should be ready in less than ten minutes. I've taken the liberty of having our ground forces assemble in the event we need to go down to a planet for the humans."
"Thank you," Ulian said. "I believe we have a plan. Time to see what comes of it."

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Chapter 7

Cassie followed the marines, giving them a good ten feet of room to move. She held her scanner high with her left hand and wielded her pistol in the right. Passing over the threshold, a cool breeze struck her as if the room were being bombarded by a powerful air conditioning unit. Outside, it was thirty degrees celsius but just inside, it dropped to eighteen!

Vincent visibly shivered at the transition and she sympathized. The sweat on her body instantly chilled and her ears ached within moments. Cassie wondered if the place became progressively colder the deeper they went. If that happened, the room with the power source might be well below freezing.

I'm jumping to conclusions, Cassie reminded herself. This is more likely an environmental control long ignored. I'm sure it's totally fine. Amazing that it still works so well, but otherwise nothing to be concerned about.

Gorman took up the rear and when he crossed the threshold, they heard a deep hissing sound. The doors slid shut behind them, barely tapping as they met in the middle. Heat moved back to Gorman, examining the door before turning on the other marine with a scowl. "What the hell did you do?"

"Me?" Gorman looked at the door then back to Heat. "Walked over it? Seriously, I didn't do anything."

"How'd it know to close when all of us were in?" Heat turned to Gil. "Any ideas?"

Gil shrugged. "Sensor equipment I suppose. Though since it did not open when you approached, I am guessing there is more to it than that. We will likely need to find the control room to open the door and leave but we might as well focus on the task at hand. After all, leaving is less vital until the ship can depart."

"I don't like being trapped," Heat said.

"Calm down," Vincent interjected. "This place is huge and I'm sure there are plenty of ways out. We haven't explored a single room yet so

we can't jump to the conclusion that we're stuck in here. Let's do as the Doctor says and make the mission our top priority. Cassie, can you guide us?"

Cassie turned away, shining her light about the room. The space was empty with a stone floor beneath them and a ceiling so high, her light wouldn't penetrate the gloom. The walls were made of the same substance as outside but darker in color. They hadn't been hit with the elements.

She tried her communicator, attempting to establish contact with the Gnosis. Static came through her earpiece and she sighed. The scanner still worked and insisted they needed to go to the left. She turned to the others and contemplated exactly how she should explain their current situation.

"Okay, so good news. I know we need to go to the left. That's where the signal's coming from. The flashlight won't get through the dark all the way to the wall but if we stay close to this one, I'm hopeful we'll be fine. I'm not picking up any mechanical items right now so if there are traps … Well … I don't want to speculate because that's all I'd be doing."

"Great," Heat grumbled. "What's the bad news?"

Gorman frowned. "Why do you assume there was?"

"Because no one says 'good news' if there's only one kind of news," Heat explained. "Agent Alexander?"

"Heat's right," Cassie replied. "I can't raise the Gnosis from within here. The metal in the walls must be interfering. We're totally cut off from them at the moment … which will likely give them some anxiety."

Gil turned to Vincent. "When will they send another party?"

"I don't know," Vincent said. "The clock's ticking for them so we need to get moving if we want to avoid them risking anyone else."

Heat stepped over to Cassie. "We've got this. Everyone else form up."

"I didn't …" Cassie bit her tongue. "Okay, yep. We've got this.

She didn't want to plunge into the darkness first but fear wasn't an option. All of them were in it together and they shared the risk. As they moved out, Cassie's heart pounded harder in her chest and she

had to take a couple calming breaths to settle down. If they encountered trouble, she couldn't be in a state of panic.

I'm here for a reason. My training and my abilities might be tested but I will prevail. We're all going to be fine. This is merely an ancient ruin, like an archaeological dig site.

The thought soothed her somewhat but only briefly. Cassie knew they were standing in a fully functional facility. The capability to pull multiple starships down to the surface meant this place could be one of the most dangerous places they encountered to date. Whatever unknown culture dwelt there in the past left behind mysteries to unravel.

Their footsteps died in the darkness, not even echoing off the ceiling high above them or the walls some distance off. Cassie scanned the floors and walls again, finding that they were treated with some substance not in their databases. It appeared to have a sound cancellation quality, like a hyper advanced acoustic foam.

We thought this looked like a temple, Cassie thought, making some notes in her tablet. Perhaps this was a room for worship and they wanted to keep things silent. She turned back to Gil. "Do you see what this structure is made of? What the stone is treated with?"

"I do," Gil replied. "It can be adjusted with the right energy pulse. We are in a silent phase right now but if for some reason they needed it to bounce sound about, it would. I have encountered many religious sanctuaries in my time and this one follows closely to the established norm by our archaeological survey departments."

"Only this religion," Gorman said, "likes to drag space ships to the surface for Sunday mass."

"That's not necessary, Sergeant," Vincent said. "Please refrain from color commentary."

Gorman sighed. "Yes, sir."

Cassie opened her mouth to speak again but stopped as the wall they were approaching appeared in the light. She picked up the pace then really examined the surface, running her light along a good five feet. There were no grooves, no marks, no signs of wear or abuse. The stone was perfectly intact likely in the same condition as it was

erected.
“This is amazing,” Cassie said. “The place must be ancient but they kept it up to this standard?”
“It would not be hard,” Gil replied. “The composition of this structure suggests it is self-healing. The same substance that kills sound can essentially patch cracks and maintain this perfect state you see. We have such technology ourselves and we employ it for buildings in our cities and homes.”
“Sounds nice,” Heat said. “Maybe we can get in on some of that.”
Vincent sighed. “Gentlemen, let’s stay focused. We need to find some kind of door to get through here. Come on, pick up the pace and hope that wherever we need to go next is as obvious as the front doors were.”
They started down the way with the wall to their left. The lack of sound pressed against Cassie’s ears. If not for the breathing of her colleagues so close by, she would’ve felt totally isolated. Combined with the darkness, even in the vast expanse of the room, she began to feel claustrophobic.
Heat held up his hand for them to stop and Cassie nearly bumped into him. He advanced forward, craning his neck to see something. “Found an ingress up here. Looks like we located the door we were hoping for.”
“And hopefully,” Gil said, “it will open for us just as the other one did.”
Cassie moved closer, holding her tablet out in front of her. Nothing seemed to happen. The energy readings remained static until Heat stepped in front of the doors. The meter began to climb and it seemed likely Gil was right. The door was about to open. But instead of the quiet hiss they heard at the front, a bone jarring clunk vibrated the floor.
“What the hell?” Gorman called out a moment before lights burst to life overhead, illuminating the entire room in a brilliant white glow. A dais sat to their left opposite the front door with a set of stairs leading up to it. The middle of the room was made up of dozens of tiles, each one meeting the other with a fine seam between.

“That was not supposed to happen,” Gil said in a calm voice that drew an angry expression from the marines. “I suppose we now know how to turn on the lights … Perhaps.”
“We don’t know how to do anything!” Heat shouted at the doctor, gesturing to the ceiling. “None of us flipped the switch for those. I walked in front of a damn door, man!”
“Stop it!” Vincent said. He didn’t shout but the command authority in his tone settled the situation. “I’m not going to tell you again about outbursts. It’s not productive to start yelling at anyone so keep your cool. There’s an explanation to what we’re seeing here and if you’d give the doctor and Cassie a chance, they’ll figure it out.” He paused, turning to Gil. “Right?”
“Of course.” Gil shrugged. “We must investigate and find how this happened. Perhaps we discovered a pressure plate or something along those lines. Or it must be motion sensitive. Hm.”
“What?” Vincent asked. “You look like you’ve got another idea.”
“Perhaps someone turned them on.”
A chill ran down Cassie’s spine. He didn’t mean them. If the facility was occupied, then someone might be watching them, waiting to see how they responded to the situation. The lack of violence offset the scary notion that someone sat around in there quietly observing them but only a little.
“I don’t know,” Cassie replied. “This feels automated to me. Why would an intelligent species lead us on?”
“Because they don’t think we’re worth talking to,” Gorman said. “Because they think they’re better than us. We might be little more than animals in their eyes. Consider evolution and what it might mean for some beings out in the middle of nowhere.”
“He has a good point.” Gil pointed. “I do not think we will have to wonder for long though. Look at the tiles.”
Cassie followed his gesture and her eyes widened. Blue light burst from the seams of several of the tiles until all of them seemed to glow. Gorman and Heat exchanged glances. Vincent held up his hand to stave off any comments even as each of them stepped back toward the wall.

“Not sure what that means,” Cassie said, “but I’m thinking we don’t necessarily want to walk on them.”
“You might be jumping to a conclusion,” Gil replied. “I think we might have to in order to proceed.”
“What?” Vincent sighed. “Do you think it’s some kind of test? Or the method to get through the door?”
“Think about it.” Gil smirked. “If you set up a temple to protect your technology, you would have security to protect it, would you not?”
Cassie ran a scan over the floor, frowning at the readings. Power emanated from the tiles, each one producing a different amount. She put them on a percentage scale to differentiate them, with the lowest being at ten and the highest at ninety. Moving over to Gil, she showed him what she found and he began his own tests.
The marines became restless while they worked but they held their peace. Apparently, Vincent was able to keep them quiet after all. Still, they wouldn’t want to stand there forever and Cassie recognized the need to hurry. Especially when she noticed the room temperature begin to rise.
At first she thought she might be crazy but then her computer showed it was already twenty-degrees Celsius. Two degrees in a few minutes. Either the power from those tiles was just that hot or the increasing warmth was part of the security protocol. Depending on how fast it started to climb and how high it went, a timer may have started.
“I’m sure you can feel the difference in the room,” Cassie said. “Gil, what do you have?”
“There are one hundred total tiles in the room,” Gil replied. “Many of them are giving off an enormous amount of power. Those that are at the lowest might be safe for a living being to touch but those on the higher end …”
“What?” Heat asked. “What about them?”
“They will likely incinerate anyone who sets foot on one.”
Gorman’s shoulders slumped. “Thank God we didn’t wander out there earlier, huh?”
“So what do you think?” Vincent asked. “Do we have to … I don’t know … step on the ones that are habitable? Do you think there’s a

specific order?"
Gil nodded. "Yes. But it should not be overly complicated. The first of those tiles is in front of this door. I can map the path to the center but I'm not sure what the point will be when we get there. Of course, we likely do not have a choice and must try it." He stepped closer to the edge and held his device over the tablet and hummed. "We have a problem."
"You think?" Heat muttered.
"What is it?" Cassie asked.
"We cannot bring our computers onto the tiles. Look."
Cassie joined him as he held it over them. The screen glitched out, making it impossible to read anything. "Great." She turned to Vincent. "Someone's going to have to go out there and be guided by us back here."
"Fantastic." Vincent turned to the marines then looked back at Cassie. "I can do it."
"No," Cassie said, shaking her head firmly. "You're in command. We can't risk you."
Heat raised his hand. "I can go. I'm sure it won't be that big of a deal."
"Your feet are too big," Gil replied. "The tiles are not small, but if you make a mistake, it could result in injury. No. I believe the only choice is for Agent Alexander to go."
"No way." Vincent stepped forward. "Out of the question. I can do this, believe me."
"You're in the same boat," Cassie replied. "Just … I've got it, guys. I've been through worse obstacle courses."
"Were the ones back home designed to incinerate you?" Gorman asked. "Cause if so, your AIA school sucked."
"No, but …" Cassie shook her head. She handed her tablet to Gil. "I'll be back for that shortly. Which one do I start with?"
"Wait!" Vincent stepped forward and took her arm. "We can find another way. I'm sure of it. We just need to … I don't know, hack the system somehow. Find an interface … a link … anything besides sending someone into a death trap. Think this through, guys. I'm certain we're overlooking something."

“We cannot ignore the fact the heat is rising,” Gil said. “And it seems quite clear the way forward is through their maze. I am not pleased, but this is not uncommon for places such as this.”
“Great.” Vincent looked Cassie in the eyes. “Be careful. I’m serious.”
Cassie smiled at him, trying to put some courage into her expression. “I’ve got this, commander. I’ll make it.”
“Okay …” Vincent stepped away. “Gil, I trust you’re going to be giving directions?”
“Indeed.” Gil stepped forward. “The highest power tiles will likely kill you instantly. The others should only burn or possibly shock you. I would not count on your boots preventing the damage or even lessening it. Listen to my instructions before proceeding. Though I have a bad feeling we will only know about when we start.”
“What’s that?” Cassie asked.
“When you set foot on a tile, I believe you will only have a few moments to move to the next one.” Gil scowled at his tablet. “I glean this from the fact that each of these seems to have a variable power reading. They could increase from pressure. I suppose we have made the right choice for another practical reason. You are the lightest of us.”
“Glad I didn’t have the extra helping at lunch,” Cassie muttered. She approached the first tile. “Want to tell me the next tile to go to after this?”
“Advance one tile ahead. After that …” Gil shrugged. “I will have to direct you. Are you ready?”
“Sure …” Cassie drew a deep breath and let it out, clearing her mind. She focused on the first tile, one which she thought looked quite large before she had to set foot on it. Now she realized it would barely hold both her feet at the same time. “Here I go.” She stepped out, poising on her toes to make minimal contact with the tile.
The second she committed her full weight to the movement, the floor sunk half an inch and the lights around her began to glow brighter. She felt the stone heat up through her boots, just a hint at first but it rapidly increased. In a few moments, it would be unbearable, potentially catching her clothes on fire if she remained.

“Which way?” Cassie shouted. “We don’t have a lot of time on each one!”

“Forward!” Gil cried.

Cassie stepped off the stone and onto the relatively cool tile. The light behind her faded just as the new one burst to life. Gil told her to step left and she did, moving sideways and remaining on her toes. She got off that one before it became warmer but when she moved, she got too close to an adjacent square.

The scalding heat emanating from it made Cassie wince but she forced herself to remain still. Gil yelled at her to move forward and she complied, then right. She paved a winding path toward the front but then had to veer almost to the front door before moving back toward their objective.

Moving through the room seemed to take forever but she figured she’d been out there for less than two minutes. Every step took her further away from safety, further from any hope of getting back if Gil somehow maneuvered her into a dead end. The possibility of dying on that floor struck her suddenly and she had a hard time remaining focused.

It won’t happen, Cassie thought, fighting through the growing sense of panic. Gil’s got the path and you’re doing fine. Just stay mobile.

The center loomed ahead and as Cassie drew closer, she noticed it was a touch larger and not glowing at all. Whatever was going to happen would soon but in her excitement to get to the end, she misstepped onto the wrong tile. A lance of burning pain shot through her foot into her knee and hip.

Crying out, Cassie exerted every ounce of discipline she could muster to avoid falling over. That would be a fatal mistake. “No! I said RIGHT, Agent!” Gil’s annoyed tone angered her but she didn’t say anything. Following his instructions got her back on the path but she was limping now. Her foot felt numb and her calf ached.

“Cassie!” Vincent shouted. “Are you … are you okay?”

“Do be quiet, Commander,” Gil complained. “Do not interrupt this process.”

The last bit of path took her all the way around the middle stone and

when she reached the final one, it sunk nearly half a foot into the floor. “What the hell is happening, Gil?” Cassie shouted. “Should it be doing this?”

A click beneath her made the stone tremble for half a second and the middle stone dropped suddenly. Cassie gasped at the sudden motion but then a console rose up from the floor, the surface lit up with a large, green light to the left. English appeared above it, two words that made her scowl.

Open Door.

“We have a problem.” Cassie tapped it and the door they needed opened. The lights around every tile disappeared and the heat in the room leveled out. She turned to look at the others and gestured to the console. “This thing showed me instructions in English.”

“What?” Heat scowled. “How’s that possible?”

“It may read brainwaves,” Gil replied. “Had I gone out there, it is likely I would’ve seen it in my language.”

“Come back!” Vincent called. “We need to look at your leg.”

Cassie limped back but her leg started to feel better when she walked normally. When she cleared the tiles, Vincent dropped down and ran a scan over her. It took a good twenty seconds before he straightened up. His expression contorted into one of concern but he showed her the readings.

“You should be fine,” Vincent said. “Looks like whatever happened to you went straight to the nerves. You’ll walk it off and be fine shortly.”

“Thank God for small miracles,” Cassie replied. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Vincent turned away. “Let’s move out. I want to be done with this place as soon as possible.”

“We should not be too hasty,” Gil said as he took up the rear. “After all, there is a good chance we will identify another such puzzle … another challenge to overcome. And if I am correct, it will likely require a different set of skills or cooperation. Whoever built this place may have used it for a rite of passage.”

“That makes sense to me,” Gorman replied. “I’ve read about all kinds of cultures having crazy hard trials for their people to ascend to different castes. Maybe we were pulled down here to prove ourselves

worthy of something."
"Like what?" Heat asked. "The right to get the hell off this planet?"
"Or something more potent," Gil answered. "Power … knowledge … a partnership with these people. We will not know until we are free and clear of their tests but one thing is certain: we are in this for the long haul." He gestured behind them and Cassie looked at the door. It closed behind them with a hiss, just as the front door had.

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Chapter 8

Fielding received the order to attack with everything they had. They were authorized to do whatever it took to stop the enemy from using their heavy weapons on the Gnosis and he fully intended to take advantage of that offer. Considering the emplacements the mercenaries were planning to use weren't easily moved around, maneuverability would be key.

"Listen up," he spoke to the others, plotting out the attack on the fly. Scans gave him a good idea of where each of the weapons were located. Since each was aimed at the ship, they would be open to rear assault and that made the marine jump packs an incredible advantage.

"We need to take these weapons out ASAP."

"Why not confiscate them?" Gillet asked. "We could turn them on the enemy."

"No point," Fielding replied. "Our ships are taking on their base right now. We need to kill the enemy and remove their teeth. I've marked the locations of where these guys have clumped up. Spread out and prepare to hit them hard. Use rockets if you still have any and blast away. If they get those turned on you … Well, you saw what the cannons can do."

None of them wanted to end up like Singer and his death motivated the others to do some serious damage. Fielding gave them the go order and readied himself for his own part to play in the assault. He gave a last update to the Gnosis bridge that they were initiating an attack plan then engaged his jump jets.

Hurling over the edge of the hull, he saw the wide expanse of trees and green ground blur beneath him. They were exposed in the air but moving swiftly enough to be difficult targets. As he plunged downward, he hit the rockets one last time to break his fall and spun in place, weapon at the ready.

Mercenaries opened fire and he dashed to the side, shooting back. He made it to a particularly large tree and paused there, taking stock of his opposition. There were six of them and they manned one of the

cannons. His scanner showed they were trying to turn it around, meaning he didn't have time waste.

Popping out, he threw a grenade and opened up, putting two rounds into a target's skull and clipping another in the arm. He reclaimed his cover just as his explosive went off. Someone screamed and he glanced again, noting he'd reduced them to one person. The big gun was in two pieces and his last target lifted a pistol to get off a final shot.

Fielding finished him before he could pull the trigger then checked his scanner for his next destination. A red mark appeared on his HUD, indicating an incoming projectile. He used his jump jets, hopping a good ten feet from the point of impact. When it exploded, it caught the nearest tree on fire.

Beams brightened the sky to his left and right, narrowly missing him as he plunged toward the ground. Impact made him sink a good three inches into the ground. He hustled to a nearby tree and took cover, checking his sensor to see how many assailants he had to deal with. Three soldiers stood roughly twenty yards away and they had decent cover behind some toppled stones. Fielding marked their location for the other marines then checked their progress. They were causing considerable havoc with the enemy forces but they were dramatically outnumbered.

Fielding established a connection with their air support. "Mustang One, this is the ground force. We need some backup. What's your current position?"

"We're hitting the enemy stronghold," Dennis replied. "Ten seconds out."

"I'm going to mark the area we need you to lay down some fire when you get back." Fielding instinctually ducked when his cover came under heavy fire, the wood splintering and complaining from the assault. "Stand by!"

He brought up his overhead map and picked the heaviest concentration of soldiers. Those he marked and sent the signal to the other marines so they knew what areas to avoid. Providing they hurried, the mercenaries would be routed quickly enough. Especially

when they didn't have any shelter to hide in.
"Status update." Fielding peeked out and returned fire on his three targets, blasting away at their cover. It made them duck so he remained visible, waiting for one of them to poke his head up. It took a good five seconds before one peeked, just revealing his forehead and eyes.
It was enough. Fielding depressed the trigger once, a red puff popping behind the target's skull before disappearing. The attack suppressed additional attackers, at least for a few moments. Falling back into his own cover, Fielding checked the reports from the other marines, noting they were all uninjured and working through their tasks.
At least we're coming out of this okay but our opponents can't be taken lightly. I don't understand why they won't work with us.
A beam splashed into his personal shield, blowing through the one-time defense. Fielding engaged his jump pack and headed back toward the Gnosis. He had no idea where the attack came from and didn't have time to look around. Getting out of the situation was the only real option.
Another shot caught him in the back just before he made touchdown on the hull. It spun him once and he crashed into the Gnosis on his side, bouncing and rolling until he was nearly at the center of the vessel. Only one of the turrets stopped his motion and he didn't immediately move, trying to gauge if he'd been hurt by the fall.
His jump pack showed online but one of the thrusters had been hit. He ran a diagnostic test on it while crawling to his feet, wincing at a burning pain in his shoulder. Moving it hurt but not so bad to suggest a break. Flexing his muscles several times, he tried to walk off the injuries, heading toward the edge of the ship so he could provide some overwatch support.
A number of explosions popped all around the ship, rockets and grenades he figured. Fighter engines roared in the distance and another low rumble exploded off toward the mercenary ship. Their pilots were on their way back and Fielding adjusted their targets appropriately.
He crouched and peered over the edge, aiming and firing at anything

that wasn't a friendly. Zooming in, he took down two men in rapid bursts then moved to the right to find additional targets. His breath caught in his throat as he saw one of the emplacements aimed in his direction.

Fielding engaged his thrusters but only one of them fired. It tossed him to the right just as they fired their weapon. The molten hot beam cut through his shoulder armor and his body instantly went numb. Dropping to the ground, he didn't dare to look at what happened. The fighters flew by overhead, firing as they engaged a strafing run.

Another explosion rattled the ship beneath him and someone started shouting over the com. "They've seared a panel on the Gnosis! They're charging in!"

They made it. Fielding cursed but he didn't have the strength to move. I can't believe they got lucky.

More shots were fired, shouts and screams filled the air but darkness encroached on Fielding's vision until unconsciousness fell over him. No matter how hard he fought, he could not remain awake and finally gave in, closing his eyes and letting the sounds of the world fade away.

***

Desmond saw the action on the screen and the ship shook violently when the heavy weapon hit them. The turret fired several times, taking down a variety of enemies but it wasn't enough to stop them from boarding the ship. He considered leaving the bridge right away and joining the others in the fight but he remained in his seat, contemplating their next move.

"Captain, I have twenty combatants onboard," Salina said. "Security personnel is ready to engage and the marines have stated they are able to come in and help. The fighters have taken down the mercenary ship and are containing the outside threat. We only have the intruders left at this point."

"Not to be taken lightly," Desmond replied. While twenty men didn't seem like a lot considering all they'd dealt with so far, these attackers

were amidst the tight corridors of the Gnosis, their home. They needed to be cautious with how they dealt with the threat. Further damage wasn't an option. "Engineering and medical … are they well protected?"

"The mainstay of our forces are located in those two sections," Salina said. "We still have the Tol'An agent running around somewhere as well."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Zach said, "the mercenaries might find him and take him out for us."

Desmond looked over the schematics of the ship. They'd armed everyone and many were holding down their particular area. The hangar was well protected by the pilots who had not launched and the technicians who didn't want their hard work stolen or destroyed. Depending on where the mercenaries attacked, they'd encounter some tough opposition.

The Tol'An agent bothered him. How could the man hide so well that they hadn't discovered him yet? What was he doing? Biding his time? Did he hope to escape with them when they launched then cause some trouble in space? There were too many options to contemplate. At least the mercenaries were attacking like soldiers.

Saboteurs tended to be far more difficult to contend with, especially when they proved to be resourceful like this one.

Fighting broke out in one of the hallways. It appeared that the mercenaries were making their way toward engineering after all. Security forces locked them down temporarily as they exchanged gunfire. Putting it on the screen, Desmond clenched his fist, watching as two Gnosis crew members were injured, possibly killed.

The mercenaries weren't making it out better. They lost numbers but they continued to press, making reasonable speed toward their destination. The marines were on their way though and that would even things up, if not end the fight for that matter. It all depended on how long they needed to get into the fight.

"Get Fielding on the line," Desmond said. "I want an update on their position."

"Lieutenant Fielding is not answering," Salina replied. "Um … Wow.

His life signs are dangerously low."
"Where is he?" Desmond moved to look at her station and cursed. "We need to get someone up there to help him soon. Can we get an emergency medical team on top of the ship?"
"I'll work on it now, sir." Salina began to coordinate the effort.
Desmond engaged his com, patching in to the marine's com net.
"Lieutenant Fielding is down," he said. "Who is currently in command?"
"Sergeant Gillet, sir. I'm in command if Fielding is out. We're making our way to the Gnosis now to flank the mercenaries. Do you have alternate orders?"
"Negative," Desmond said. "I just wanted to get your position."
"We are boarding now and should be on the enemies within one minute. We'll coordinate with the rest of the security personnel so we don't get shot." Gillet paused. "Looks like we've got some bodies at the breach point. There were people near here when the gun tore the hole in the ship."
Desmond closed his eyes, fighting back a sense of frustration.
"Understood. Do what you can to eliminate the threats. Keep us informed on the bridge and we'll do what we can to support you from here. Captain out." He turned to Salina. "Are those medics on the way?"
"Yes, sir, I'm coordinating them so they do not encounter any enemies on their way. I don't want to lead them into danger and have them become casualties themselves."
"Thank you, let me know when they reach the lieutenant." Desmond tried to raise Vincent on the com but only received static. They hadn't heard from that party in some time and he worried they might have failed. Each member of that team might already be dead and if that was the case, then fending off the mercenaries would merely prolong the inevitable.
Desmond forced himself to remain optimistic. Cassie, Vincent and Gil were brilliant. If anyone could get through the facility and turn off that power system, it would be them. They needed more time and a little faith. Considering everything they were contending with, it

would be hard to provide both but there wasn't much choice.
Come on, Vincent. Give us a sign that we've still got some players in the game. We need some good news right about now. Desmond turned to the screen and watched as the fighting escalated. Grenades popped in the corridor, driving the security personnel back to avoid the inevitable carnage. We need it more than you know.

***

Ulian stood, hands clasped behind his back. The unknown vessel started moving toward them, slow at first but picking up speed. All defense systems showed green and ready for action. Fighters showed online, waiting for deployment orders. If this ship proved to be an enemy, the Stalwart would give it a real fight.
"No response to hails," Viran said. "Still trying on all frequencies and using the universal codes." Those were sounds, vibrations and light waves the Pahxin had used in the past to communicate with new life forms. A few times, they were required until the two cultures could agree upon a common tongue.
I do not think this ship is having difficulty understanding us, Ulian thought. I have a bad feeling they're simply ignoring us. This stinks of an attack pattern. I would not be surprised if they initiate a first strike against us.
"Erda, prepare for evasive maneuvers," Ulian said. "Morala, get the fighters launched and send out the search and rescue shuttle. Have them fly well away from the potential battle floor. I want them to start looking for the Gnosis. I'm hoping their scans will be sufficient to search the system without scouring the whole thing."
"Yes, sir." Morala went about his task, speaking quietly into a microphone.
Ulian narrowed his eyes as the boxy ship continued its approach. He checked the navigation console and noted they were just inside extreme range. If they fired their most powerful weapons, they might score a hit providing their target continued on its present course. It couldn't possibly be all that maneuverable.

But I won't assume anything out here. Ulian sat back down. "Do we have a full scan of that thing yet?"
"I'm sorry, sir," Viran said. "I'm not quite done but the normal procedures aren't working. The hull is made up of some kind of compound that is deflecting scans. The only thing I've picked up for sure is a strong power source somewhere in the middle. If I'm right about that, then it's one of the most powerful reactors I've ever seen."
"Indeed." Ulian leaned forward. "Do you feel that would translate to weapon strength or merely their endurance to continue firing for the foreseeable future?"
"I would be speculating either way," Viran replied. "However, my gut suggests the latter. Surface scan isn't even showing any visible signs of weaponry."
"I won't hold you to it." Ulian nudged Morala. "Assessment?"
"We should attack," Morala said. "First strike since they don't want to talk. We've extended a hand and they're ignoring it."
"That doesn't necessarily mean violence," Ulian pointed out. "Though they've got some serious power, they may not have range. Their communications could rely on being close up. The humans had a similar problem when they reached out to us, remember?"
"The humans reached out," Morala replied. "That sets them apart from a strange vessel closing on us without a declared intent."
"Can we assume it's violent?" Viran asked. "We might start an incident if we jump to conclusions and start blasting away."
"He raises an excellent point." Ulian sighed. "Still, we've taken an aggressive action by putting our fighters in the field. I'm not happy about this course of action, nor what I'm about to state, but for now, we hold fire until they start it. Once they do, we'll hold nothing back. Morala, inform the pilots that they are on standby out there."
"Yes, sir." Morala didn't seem happy. She erred on the side of defense through strong offense in most engagements. During her most recent evaluation, she went through the simulator with quite the trigger finger. The passing grade came from efficiency more than diplomacy. Ulian hoped he might be able to coach her into a more thoughtful approach.

However, in this case, he honestly agreed with her. Ulian's gut wanted him to attack, to fire first and not risk his ship on the hope that this strange vessel was a friendly. Considering the Gnosis disappeared somewhere in that system, he had good cause to go in guns blazing. He'd also learned to never go with his first instinct when it came to violence.

One could take back many things but a full volley of beam weaponfire tended to set a stage for a long time.

"Still nothing on hail," Viran said.

They're going to attack. Ulian shook his head. He knew the signs but he held out for as long as he could, waiting for that moment to come when they pulled the trigger first. We'll do anything necessary to survive this encounter and complete our mission. I suppose we'll find out if we've met our technological match in a moment.

"They're raising shields," Viran announced. "There's a power build up."

Morala turned a severe glare to Ulian. "Sir?"

"Erda," Ulian said, "open fire. Full volley." I hope they're not simply opening their window to wave at us.

The screen lit up as a barrage of energy fire blurred away from the Stalwart, connecting with the incoming ship. Each attack connected with the bow of the target, causing the shields to appear in a spectacular blue globe with tiny electrical pulses dancing over the surface. It faded out a moment later and the ship continued its lumbering approach.

"Minor shield damage," Viran said. "Er … correction, I think. It's hard to get a solid reading on what I'm seeing. For a moment, it looked like they were down to seventy-percent but now, they're nearly to ninety … Then it dropped to eighty. This looks like what happens when we recalibrate to bolster a particularly weakened session … only constantly."

Morala left her station and joined Viran. "I've used this tactic in a simulation. It can lessen the effectiveness of beam attacks, essentially granting the defender an advantage. The Ahntha test pits you against overwhelming odds. It worked surprisingly well though it puts a

serious burden on the reactor."
"Unless you have practically unlimited power," Ulian said. He ran through a number of options, including the use of heavier ordinance against them. The enemy shields needed to be weakened at the very least before attempting a different tactic. "The best offense against this would be to perform a similar exercise with our weapons."
"Alter their power output?" Morala asked. "As in alternating the intensity of the beams?"
Ulian nodded. "Precisely. At least until we can get a good scan that predicts the pattern they are using. There must be something. Viran, have you detected one yet?"
"Um … my apologies, sir. I wasn't looking." Viran cleared his throat. "I'm scanning for that now."
Ulian smirked at Morala's scowl. "Now, now. Just because you've used the tactic before doesn't mean you should give him a hard time. Anyway, finding what we're looking for will be a lot easier when we're blasting away at them. Did our shuttle get out there for the search and rescue?"
"Yes, sir," Morala replied. "They are well outside of combat range and should be conducting their scans soon."
The ship shook, a quick motion that most definitely felt like something struck them. They were moving backward but nothing should've been in their way. Ulian checked his own computer rather than wait for a report. They'd been attacked. The enemy fired some kind of nearly invisible beam weapon that jarred their shields.
Defenses held at one-hundred percent. They were testing the waters to see how tough we are. Ulian rubbed his chin. Their next assault will be heavier and include some precision I expect. We need to get that beam attack pattern test down.
Ulian turned to the pilot. "Where are we with alternating attack intensity?"
"I've got it now, sir." Erda tapped his console. "Firing now!"
The ship's weapons discharged again, a variety of them popping off and slamming into the enemy's shields. Varying degrees of power tapped into their generators hard but they remained stable, recharging

at a reasonable rate. Because they had so many cannons on the Stalwart, they were able to keep up the assault almost indefinitely. After over fifty shots, the weapons stopped to cool off and give the generators a chance to recharge. Ulian turned to Viran, waiting for his report. The young man worked feverishly, his hands moving so swiftly over the controls. It would be a miracle if he didn't make any mistakes. When he finally looked up, sweat clung to his brow.

"I think I've got a shield pattern," Viran explained. "I've fed it into the targeting computer. If we time it right, we should be able to hit their sections that are at their weakest during the recalibration. I think they started to respond to our attack, anticipating where the more powerful blasts would hit them and ignoring the weaker."

"Exactly as I hoped," Ulian said. "Alternate those now, Erda. And ensure that you use the timing mechanism from Viran."

"I'm picking up an energy reading," Morala announced. "They're attacking."

"Evasive maneuvers," Ulian ordered, "brace for impact."

Erda got them moving, a swift motion too much for the inertial dampeners to compensate for. They didn't fully escape as something clipped their starboard engines, causing a tremor through the hull. Ulian was about to ask for a damage report when he noticed something spilling out of the target.

"Do you see that?" Ulian gestured. "Anyone know what that is?"

"Fighters of some kind," Viran said, "roughly twenty it looks like. I'm trying to get them on scan but once again, they're covered by that material. I'm having a hard time compensating to get through."

"Understood." Ulian turned to Morala. "Activate the pilots. We don't need to contend with both blasts from their ship and being harassed at the same time."

"I'm on it." Morala made the call while Erda initiated another round of attacks. The new assault seemed to do the trick, causing their shields significant damage. Even with their generators able to move energy to the affected areas, there was only so much a defensive emitter could take before it began to fail.

We're going to find out your breaking point soon, Ulian thought. And

when we do, we're going to discover why you didn't feel like talking.
Part of him realized that if the Gnosis encountered this ship, it may well have been destroyed. They did not have the firepower to penetrate these defenses.
He didn't have time for grim thoughts, putting all his concentration toward the battle instead. Engaging the pilots meant they were in a real skirmish now, one they needed to take quite seriously. The next few minutes might determine whether they were able to complete their mission or needed to withdraw for reinforcements.

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Chapter 9

Webber received the warning message from the bridge regarding the second round of invaders. More security was dispatched to help protect engineering, but it didn't help his confidence. Over twenty combatants entered the Gnosis and if they made a rush for any one department, they would have a good chance to overwhelm the defenses.

The other technicians didn't know how much danger they were in. One in particular thought an explosion removed the panel from the side of the ship and wanted to go out and put it back in place. Luckily, cameras were down in that section so they couldn't see how many enemies spilled on board.

My men don't need to be panicking about this attack. Webber rubbed his eyes and grabbed his second, Lieutenant Tara Gallin. She was a short woman with shaggy brown hair and brown eyes. Her disposition tended to be softer than his, making her far more diplomatic. She'd likely be his boss someday, especially since he lost his stomach for military politics.

"What's up?" Tara asked. "I'm kinda busy, Chief."

"I get it," Webber replied, keeping his voice low. "We've got a problem. The bridge just told me we've got more invaders. Probably more than twenty. Looks like they might be coming our way."

"Damn it." Tara sighed. She looked around the room. "I might be able to rig up a surprise for them. We can sneak through the maintenance passages and flank them or something."

"What're you thinking?"

Tara shrugged. "Bombs … Some kind of horrifying projectile made from broken parts? We've got plenty of stuff lying around that we planned to bring home to recycle. I'm sure they'll be just as useful when we pull them out of a bunch of idiots who thought it was a good idea to come on board."

"Horrifying was the right word." Webber shook his head. "Okay, go ahead but keep the overall situation on the down low. Only tell who

you have to. I'm going to work with Thayne to see what he can come up with."
"I'm on it, sir." Tara trundled off, grabbing two other technicians before disappearing into the engineering section.
Thayne stood at the hyperdrive terminal, working quickly on some program or another. Webber stood beside him and tried to keep up with his typing but eventually gave up. "What're you doing with this module?"
"Shielding it from the energy drain," Thayne replied. "Though I suspect you want me to help with the invaders we have on board."
"How did you know?"
"I have priority access to communications." Thayne tapped the side of his head. "I heard about it as soon as it happened."
"Ah." Webber nodded. "Then yes, do you have any ideas on how we can keep this place locked down?"
"I do but it depends on how they try to get in." Thayne looked at the door. "I can put up a magnetic field that will repel projectiles like grenades and such … and we can use it like a shield to avoid beam weapons, too. However, we still have power problems. I'll need hand batteries to keep it up for long."
"If you send a grenade back their way, then we might solve the problem," Webber said. "Imagine their surprise if they toss an explosive and it comes right back at them."
"If they're smart and at all cautious, they'll pick it up on a scanner." Thayne hummed. "I'll try my best to mask it. If our people put up a real fight out there though, it might distract the enemy from doing the right thing. In which case, our plan will be fine. Either way, it'll buy some time for whatever else we're going to try."
"Tara's doing something with the maintenance passages," Webber said. "That should help. Until then, we need to ensure they can't get in here."
"Understood." Thayne nodded. "I'm on it. Let me know if you need anything else. I'll be over there gathering up as many batteries as I can find. It won't take long once I've got them in place … but it won't be good for our soldiers either. You might want to get them to move to

another position that will allow them to be effective still."
"I'm on it." Webber hurried back to his office and contacted the bridge, filling them in on the plan. He hoped they would be able to get their people moved around in time. Considering everything that was happening, coordinating efforts would be difficult. They were all about to learn just how well trained the Gnosis crew had been for a real catastrophe.

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Heat led the way into the next section of the alien structure. He fought a sense of growing frustration, a feeling of helplessness amidst the strange architecture and lack of direct opposition. If only these beings would show themselves or throw up a threat which could be met directly. Automated defense turrets beat death traps any day.
The corridor from the tile room was just shy of thirty yards and they entered another chamber. This one was much smaller and their lights easily illuminated the walls and low ceiling. They all stopped just inside as the once again the door shut behind them. Luckily, there were no noticeable tiles.
Smooth walls surrounded an open floor plan with another door to the right. As Heat examined the area, a small section of the wall to his left began to move. He aimed his weapon but Cassie touched his arm. "It's a computer console of some kind," she said. "Don't you think, Gil?"
"Yes," Gil replied. "Perhaps this is our chance to get some answers about this place and the people who live here. Let's take a look."
"Be careful," Vincent said. "Do some scans first … Make sure you're not going to be electrocuted like in that damn tile room."
Heat paced the area, taking in their surroundings. He examined the door, really studying it for structural weaknesses. Like the walls it was perfectly smooth and lacked any blemishes. He considered running his hand over the surface but thought better of it. If the stone walls had a strange substance preventing scans, he didn't want to find out what the doors had going on.
He turned his attention to the ceiling, noting it was exactly the same

as the walls. Something must've been keeping the place up. There was no way an aged structure could look so flawless after years of neglect. If he was right, then the creatures who lived there might've been observing them, watching their actions.

Cheery. Heat shook his head and joined the others at the terminal. They'd finished their initial scans and Gil was already trying to get the thing going. He tapped away at a smooth, black panel and light erupted from a screen. The doctor smiled, his eyes lighting up as he brought the system online.

"Good job," Vincent said. "How did you do that?"

"This was another culture impacted by Orb technology," Gil explained. "This means the universal coding from our own Orbs allows one to interface with these types of things on a fundamental level. It quickly seeks out the similarities and gives us a fair comparison. From there, we access their systems. The only challenge becomes security."

"Which isn't a problem this time," Cassie continued. "There doesn't even appear to be a password here."

"That should strike you as odd," Heat said. "Don't you think?"

Gil shrugged. "We are in a situation where everything is odd, Sergeant. When we plunge into ancient sites, we rarely know what we are getting into. It is unfortunate we were forced to come in here but at least we are progressing. I suspect many have failed to survive the first of the tests."

"What does that mean?" Gorman asked. "You think people died back there?"

"They were not let out." Gil shrugged as he typed. "Their bodies were likely cleaned up by whatever is keeping this place so immaculate."

Heat grunted. "The thought of finding some room full of skeletons is not doing anything for me at all."

"At least we'd know where they went?" Cassie offered. Heat glared at her and she held up her hands. "Sorry! Trying to help."

"Don't." Heat shook his head. "Cause you're not." He stepped away again, watching the door. "Gorman, keep an eye on the way we came from. Just in case our hosts want to collect our bodies before we're

dead."
They stood for far too long in Heat's opinion. Five minutes stretched to ten. He didn't understand where his companions found their patients. He was practically crawling out of his skin standing in there. He wanted to start trying to find a way through the door, using explosives or something.
But they continued playing with the terminal, working through it as if they had all the time in the world. Heat recognized they understood the urgency but perhaps they truly didn't have a choice. Things happened in the time required. He only hoped they wouldn't be in there for an hour.
"Oh, look." Cassie pointed. "This is in English as well!"
"Amazing," Gil replied. "I see it in Pahxin."
"See," Heat said, "that's just creepy! What's it say?"
Cassie replied, "It's information about the people who occupied this planet. It's sort of a historical record of their experiments into higher cognitive abilities."
Gorman lifted a hand. "Aren't those just things like … answering a com or pulling a trigger? Everything we do is a cognitive ability, isn't it?"
"They're referring to things like ESP," Cassie said, "but on a grand scale. We've seen things like telekinesis on Earth but they're talking about it being a way of life here. Like … everyone could do it."
"Our people," Gil added, "have probed the possibilities of this but we have never been able to prove it. Nor have we particularly shown an aptitude for it. These people must have been naturally gifted to go this far. Once they broke through from the experimental phase into commonplace usage, their lives would have changed dramatically."
"Why?" Heat asked. "Sounds like just another tool to me. Something new that people can do."
Vincent said, "Think about it. Suddenly, your neighbor can read your mind. You don't have to get off your lazy ass to get your tablet and that's just two examples. Psychic abilities taken to this level change cultures. Most of our theories revolve around a small subset of the population evolving to that state but this sounds like the entire

civilization did it."
"If we dig," Cassie said, "we'll probably find there were those who couldn't learn how to do it or didn't take to the process. They might've died off … or been killed even."
"Did you find anything about why we're here?" Gorman asked. "Anything that might explain what happened to the other ships?"
Gil shook his head. "Not yet. I am still digging. These people are fascinating though. They have made strides I cannot even imagine in this field. I am referring to things such as memory transference too. That is to say, their education system allowed them to implant topics directly into the mind of a student through psychic connection."
"Sounds like a movie," Heat muttered.
"That's a logical step," Cassie said. "Tap that … They're calling out birthing records. Note that they declined steadily until they practically had no more pregnancies. I'm guessing here, but it may be that they started living in their imaginations. The physical side of their bodies likely lost appeal. They were no longer interested in the pleasures of the flesh."
"The drive for procreation died." Gil rubbed his chin then snapped his fingers. "Probably because they found a way to extend their lives. Beyond the body."
"What the hell?" Heat scoffed. "What are you even saying?"
"Transferring their memories," Vincent said. "If they figured out how to do that between one another, what would it take to go the next step? Put memories into say … a computer? Or some kind of bioengineered device? It would be a form of immortality. Creepy, unethical I'm sure, but it sounds possible if you accept all this."
"You are correct." Gil tapped at the device. "I am downloading this data into my tablet now. These people may have found the secret to immortality but not as most sentient beings would like. Most of us want to be as we are forever without the threat of death or wasting away. The compromise, to remain a consciousness, is very possible."
"How long can you possibly live in your own head?" Gorman shook his head. "It would drive someone crazy."
"Maybe," Cassie replied. "But if they evolved to that state, then it

wouldn't be strange for them. It would simply be how they were. Think about it. You don't yearn for the days when you didn't have a thumb."

Heat smirked at the comparison. "She's got you there."

The door opened on the opposite side of the room, admitting them to the next chamber. Gil took a step forward, leaving his tablet to continue downloading. "It appears we must have discovered whatever we were meant to learn here. They are admitting us to the next layer of the puzzle."

"I love being led," Heat said. "You ready to see what's next on the crazy menu?"

"Give the tablet another moment," Gil replied. "And we can get to the heart of this culture … and hopefully discover what happened to them, leaving this place vacant."

Vincent shook his head. "They may not be visible … but I'm not entirely convinced we're alone."

"I was thinking the same thing," Cassie said. "Looks like the download is complete. Come on. The Gnosis doesn't have a lot of time left and if we've only scratched the surface, we're going to have to pick up the pace in a major way."

***

Desmond double checked the report he received, indicating that only twelve of the intruders moved on engineering. Two died during their assault but that left six unaccounted for. Were they dividing their forces in hopes they might take a different department? Which would they care about?

The bridge. Attacking the hub of the entire ship made sense. They'd gain access to several systems but more importantly, they had a chance to capture or kill the highest ranking officers aboard. The gamble seemed worth the effort to divide their forces. Each of the mercenaries came heavily armed and would be tough to repel if they got close.

But the elevator's locked down. Desmond scowled in thought, puzzling

through how the attackers might still find a way inside. They could likely hack their way in if they were particularly good with computers but it would take time. As soon as they start tampering, we could send for reinforcements.
“Salina, divert security personnel to the bridge elevator,” Desmond said. “Get them here now.”
“You don’t think …” Zach stopped abruptly. “You know, they don’t even need to get the elevator working. They could make their way up the shaft with the emergency ladders. Even so, they’d have to breach the door and we’d be able to blast away. Trying to take this room would be a suicidal move.”
“I’m not putting it past them,” Desmond replied. “Besides, if they get engineering, they’ll be in the perfect position to hold the rest of the ship if they take us out next. Maybe they just want to be ready for that. I’m sure they believe they’re going to take the ship in the next twenty minutes.”
“Do you agree?” Deacon asked.
Desmond shook his head. “Not at all. First, because Webber’s a maniac and he’ll be damned before anyone takes his department. Second, the marines are closing in behind them and they can’t possibly stand against the power armor. And finally, our people are pretty clever. None of them are going to give up their home without a real fight.”
“Our security personnel is almost here,” Salina said. “They should be ready to hold off the attackers.”
“Okay. Now everyone simply has to hold their positions and start finishing these guys off.” Desmond leaned forward, peering at the screen. Outside appeared particularly tranquil. The fighters drove off what few ground forces were still lingering about. “They have finite resources so we should have the advantage … for now.”

***

Lieutenant Sandra Berg wanted to employ her medical degree for something special, something useful. When she joined the Gnosis project, she thought she’d be worrying about mild injuries and

studying the environmental effects of space travel on the crew. She never imagined they would enter combat.

So when she and a small medical team were dispatched to retrieve the downed marine lieutenant on the hull of the ship, she began questioning her life decisions.

Sandra wore a backpack of medical supplies and a pistol strapped to her hip. The weapon felt alien to her and though her military training included a weapons course, she only visited the shooting range when she had to pass her fitness tests. That included exactly two trips to fire a weapon.

The two young men who accompanied her were medics from the military. They weren't doctors, but soldiers first. Technically, she should've let them lead the way but she felt compelled to take point as they said. They were enlisted and though they'd seen combat before, it had been years.

Working in the medical bay likely dulled their skills.

Sergeant Jon Dorland was a muscular fellow with a bald head and craggy face. He was only thirty years old but hard twenties aged him. Sandra brought him along in case they needed to take the lieutenant out of the heavy power armor the marines favored. She couldn't lift the chest piece nor could she use the tool to disconnect it.

Sergeant Willis Montgomery was much thinner but knew battlefield triage. He'd acted as a corpsman and attended further training before joining the Gnosis. Depending on what they found, he might be better suited to provide emergency services for the lieutenant. Sandra half wondered why she even went when he was available.

Because if we have to do something major, I might have to conduct a procedure right there. The thought horrified her but she needed to be ready for anything. Performing surgery outside on an alien world would count as the most insane thing she'd ever done but it would be a small price to pay if she saved a life.

They headed out from the medical bay and cut down to one of the maintenance access points. From there, they intended to climb the ladder system to reach an external hatch. The hope was they could avoid any enemy contact but when they collected their charge, they

needed to go through one of the larger entrances.
Carrying a patient down the narrow tunnels would not work.
The initial dash from the medical bay to the door took less than two minutes but Sandra's heart raced so fast, she felt like she'd been out there for half an hour. Dorland opened the passage and took point, crawling inside and hustling down the passage to their ladder. Sandra went second with Montgomery taking up the rear. He closed the panel behind them.
Red lights provided eerie illumination to travel by. Black pipes in the wall looked like they were covered in blood and the gray sections were difficult to make out. Only a bright overhead LED let her know they were on the correct path. The ladder itself blended right into the wall.
Dorland began crawling up. "This is going to be a tough one," he called back. "We have to go nearly seven stories."
"Sounds like fun," Montgomery grumbled. "Ma'am, do you want me to go next?"
Sandra sighed. She didn't look forward to crawling up seventy plus feet. The exposure of being last on the ladder terrified her and she didn't know the right answer. If she let the young man head up first, then she'd have anxiety the entire way but at the same time, going second made her feel like something of a coward.
"I'll … I'll go next if you don't mind."
"Your call." Montgomery stepped aside for her and she moved forward, starting the climb immediately. She regretted the decision to not prepare herself. Not even fifteen feet up, her arms started to tense up and hurt. Anxiety made it worse. She was in decent shape. There was no reason she should be tired so quickly.
I can stop at one of the landings if I have to. Sandra took heart in the fact they weren't going to be sixty feet up and have to hang there, catching her breath. When she looked up, she saw Dorland was already halfway to the top. What is he, part monkey? How the hell is he climbing up there so fast?
The two soldiers had been through far worse when it came to athletic pursuits. Climbing the ladder probably didn't even register as work to

them. Sandra felt like she was going to pass out by the time she was halfway through the climb. She stepped off at the fifty foot point and leaned against the wall as feeling returned to her arms.
“We don’t have much time for rest,” Montgomery said. “We’re almost there, ma’am.”
“I … know …” Sandra replied through heavy gasps. “I’m … I’ll … I’ll be there … in a second … Go ahead.”
“Alright.” Montgomery started up again and she followed, stretching her shoulders before grabbing the rungs. A sound behind her made her panic, granting her renewed strength to hustle. Luckily, the other two were fast and she couldn’t possibly have caught up to them. Dorland worked at the hatch and got it to open long before she arrived.
Glancing down, Sandra didn’t see anything but she was sure she heard a noise. There were too many hostiles running around the ship and any one of them could’ve taken to the maintenance tunnels. Of course, why would they bother? There wasn’t anything to mess with down there. The bad guys needed to take engineering or the armory.
They wouldn’t pursue a couple of medics crawling through the bowels of the ship.
Montgomery and Dorland grabbed her arms as she reached the top and they hoisted her the rest of the way up. A warm breeze caught her from the side and she felt an overwhelming sense of fear grip her stomach. Standing on the Gnosis felt ominous and as she looked out in all directions, there was nothing but forest for as far as the eye could see.
Knowing she stood so far above the ground didn’t help. Even though the ship remained stable, Sandra’s mind wouldn’t allow her to be okay with standing so high up. She didn’t even realize she had a problem with heights until that moment. What a time to figure it out. Damn anxiety!
“There he is!” Dorland pointed. “Let’s go.”
The soldiers jogged away but Sandra took it slowly. The hull was uneven, with different bits and parts sticking up here and there. She didn’t know what they were all for but their only purpose in that

moment was to act as a tripping hazard. Her companions arrived long before she did and they were already performing an examination.
“He’s taken a serious injury to the left arm,” Montgomery announced. “The attack sheared off the shoulder piece of the armor. The socket’s taken damage, the muscle’s torn and I won’t know how bad the rest is until we get him out of this gear to take a look. Dorland, do you have the tool to unlock it?”
“I’m on it.” Dorland rifled about in his pack and the two men went about removing the armor.
Sandra used her scanner to do a full diagnosis of the damage. Her initial assessment didn’t look good. Lieutenant Fielding lost a lot of blood in the time it took for them to arrive but at least he was only unconscious. His vital signs were low. A break on his humerus resulted in a compound fracture, meaning they had a lot of work to do to get him stabilized enough to move.
“This will be rough,” Sandra said, taking off her pack. She took out the portable stretcher and tapped the buttons on one side. It extended to six feet, giving them plenty of area to carry the man. “Do you have the armor off yet?”
“Almost.” Dorland grunted. “This isn’t easy. This stuff isn’t meant to come off from the outside. They’ve got all kinds of controls in there to pop it right off.”
“Can’t we get into his computer system?” Sandra asked.
“There’s damage,” Montgomery said. “I tried to access it but it’s not taking my security password. Either that or these maniacs changed the codes. I’ve heard about that being a thing since they don’t want anyone to get through with a computer and kick them out of their armor.”
“Fair point.” Sandra tapped her leg impatiently. She wanted to rush them, to badger them through the process until the lieutenant was able to be treated but she knew it was pointless. Becoming part of the problem wouldn’t help anyone. Keeping quiet, on the other hand, proved to be one of the hardest things she’d done in a long time.
Sandra was about to say something when something moved in her peripheral vision. She looked and gasped, falling backward onto the

deck and groping for her gun. A man emerged from the panel and advanced on them and he was wearing an enemy uniform. She didn't know which side he was on but his presence drew the attention of her companions.

Montgomery went for his weapon and took a shot to the face, the blow killing him instantly. He collapsed on the hull, unmoving with a hole where his nose used to be. Sandra stared at the corpse for a moment then directed her wide-eyed attention back to the assailant. He continued toward them, a twisted expression of hatred in his face. Dorland didn't move but he remained poised, muscles at the ready. He stood up and lifted his hands. "Don't … don't try anything …" Sandra whispered the words. "Just … we'll figure this out …"

"Maybe," Dorland replied. "I doubt this guy needs all three of us, Doc."

"He won't kill us if we're not a threat …" Sandra didn't believe the words and the moment they came out of her mouth she regretted them as ridiculous. This monster didn't care about them at all and would likely murder them all if he got the chance. "Do you think he's … he's … Tol'An?"

"Probably," Dorland said. "He's not well enough armed to be one of the mercenaries. Those guys brought real guns. That's just a pistol he's carrying."

The man grunted out meaningless syllables, words that were clearly in another language. Sandra shook her head. "We can't understand you!"

"Do you think he understands us?" Dorland asked. "When he gets close, I'll deal with him."

Sandra started to get up but the Tol'An aimed at her, gesturing for her to remain on the ground. She nodded, lifting her hands to show she wasn't going to try anything. If Dorland attacked him and failed, they would both die. Fear made her vision blur and she couldn't calm down, couldn't breathe through it.

The Tol'An was less than ten feet away. Dorland leaned forward, ready to make his attack. Sandra held her breath, waiting for the drama to unfold and to see how her life might end. It all hit her hard. The few brief seconds she had to worry about what might happen next

went by in slow motion.
Graduating medical school … applying for the Gnosis … finishing the interview … boarding the ship … accepting the assignment to save Fielding … as the last event crossed her mind, she felt bitter that she was going to fail in her final act. The brave marine would die and she'd be following shortly after.
Dorland bound forward. A gun went off, a beam going wide and slapping the hull a few feet from Sandra's head. She yelped, shoving herself away. Only then did she remember she was armed and needed to draw her weapon. She struggled with it, finally clearing the holster but Dorland was grappled with the Tol'An. There was no clear shot!
An Earth firearm went off, a single shot from a high powered rifle. Sandra thought she might pass out from the stress of the situation. The sound was so loud, it made her ears ring and her body go numb. The Tol'An dropped to the ground, half his head gone. Dorland stumbled back, brushing away gore from his chest.
Lieutenant Fielding slumped, letting his rifle fall to the ground. "Sorry about the drama," he muttered. "I thought you might need some help there."
"Thank you!" Dorland dropped down beside him. "Can you help us get that armor off?"
"Whatever you need to get me out of here, I'll be happy to help," Fielding replied. "Thanks for coming up here for me."
"No problem," Sandra kept her voice low in an attempt to hide the tremor coloring her tone. Her hands shook as she put her gun away and found her scanner again. "We're going to get you out of here, lieutenant. Just hang in there. We've got this."
"I'm sure you do." The armor hissed as he disengaged it from the inside. "I'm … probably going to pass out now."
Sandra did her best not to look at Montgomery or to give in to the guilt of his death. There was a man to help and she focused on that. There'd be time to mourn the medic later. In that moment, they needed to finish their job and get their patient back to the medical bay. She'd had enough excitement for two lifetimes.

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Chapter 10

Tara relished the opportunity to put some hurt down on the bastards who dared to board her ship. The maintenance tunnels and accesses passages of the Gnosis belonged to her and the crews she commanded. They could get anywhere in no time and it afforded them excellent opportunities for traps.

The attackers wanted to take engineering. Before they could, they'd have to get through some makeshift cannons. Tara hyper-charged some of their compression tools to throw shrapnel and salvaged grenades into the enemy's ranks. Enough of these would turn the hallway into a bloody mess but it would do the trick of keeping people out.

A laser trip wire went across the floor. The first person to break it would arm the mechanism and the second would make it fire. This would assure maximum damage to their targets, hopefully wiping out a large section of the invaders. She figured the close proximity would render them all combat ineffective.

Any who survived would be easily taken down.

Combined with Thayne's work on the door and it seemed they were in a good place to keep engineering clear but Tara didn't want to rely solely on the traps. Armed with pistols, they used the maintenance passage to get to the end of the hallway. They'd be able to back up the marines if necessary though she doubted it would be.

The fact they aren't here yet is somewhat disturbing. Tara checked her scanner but she didn't see anyone on it. Who the hell is jamming this thing? And how?

One of her people tapped her shoulder and she looked up in time to see the enemy charging down the hall. They were running from something and a moment later, gunfire made it apparent the marines had engaged them. The mercenaries returned fire but the mainstay of their force seemed to be there, moving right toward the shrapnel trap.

Tara suddenly realized that the marines needed to keep away or they'd be caught up in it as well. She frantically connected her com to

the bridge and spoke quickly. “Tell the marines not to pursue the enemy forces toward engineering! Repeat: do NOT follow! We have traps set up and they’re really nasty!”
“Confirmed,” Salina’s voice replied. “One moment.”
We don’t have a moment! Tara chewed her lip then shouted through the vent. “Guys! Be careful! Hold back!” Hopefully these jerks don’t know our language well enough to take that as a warning. Chances were good no one heard her, not the marines or the mercenaries. Too much was going on and the chaos was out of control.
The marines kept up their fire, high-caliber weapons echoing off the hallway. Tara’s ears rang and started to hurt and she fell back further into the maintenance passage. Watching through the cameras located over the engineering door, she saw a grenade fly toward the door then bounce toward the mercenaries.
Thayne’s toy worked! Tara didn’t know if it would be she was impressed either way. The mercenaries charged the door, perhaps believing they were saving themselves from the grenade by moving forward.
The guy on point tripped the laser … The next one engaged the attack … A massive explosion knocked the loose panel free and metal filled the hall, bouncing around like popcorn. Tiny pops sounded as the grenades exploded. Meat slapped the ceiling and blood coated the floors.
Men flopped around on the ground, some missing limbs and others suffering from grievous head wounds. The carnage turned Tara’s stomach but it had the right effect. The mercenaries that attacked engineering were certainly out for the count. None of them would survive their injuries, that was certain.
Tara moved toward the access panel when one of her people grabbed her arm, yanking her back. “What the hell?”
A marine shouted, “Fall back! Now!” Power armor pounded the deck as they rushed away, darting around the corner. Before they got much further, a massive explosion shook the entire ship, knocking Tara against the wall then to the floor. She struggled to stand but someone helped her up.

“What did those idiots do?” Webber’s voice burst from the overhead speakers. “I lost cameras.”
Tara peered out through the access panel and gasped as she was looking at trees through a massive hole in the side of the ship. It was easily large enough to crawl through but not much worse. Her mind raced on what they could do to seal it up. They had the metal for it in the hangar bay. It would just take some time to get it down there and secure it in place.
“We have a problem,” Tara reported to Webber. “Our guests decided on a parting shot. They opened a hole in the hull. We’re going to have to get it sealed up ASAP.”
“Savages!” Webber cursed, going into a diatribe of profanity that would’ve made anyone blush. When he finished, he let out a long breath. “Do you have the people to handle it?”
“Yes, we’ll get on it right now. I’ll have the marines secure the area so we don’t get shot at while we’re working.”
“Good. I want this closed up as soon as possible. That will definitely prevent us from getting out of here.”
“Understood.” Tara turned off the com and stepped out into the corridor, holding her hands up so she wouldn’t be shot. The marines aimed at her for half a second until they realized she was on their side. “Can you guys secure the area outside? We’re going to get some supplies and clean up the mess.”
“Were you responsible for those guys?” Gillet asked.
“Only the part where they got torn up by the shrapnel,” Tara said. “The big boom was all them. We’re on a time crunch here though. Can you guys move out?”
“Yeah, we’ve got it.” Gillet nodded to the others and they left through the hole. Tara gestured for her people to follow her. They’d need to go out through the hangar with the supplies she was thinking about and it would take time to secure the area. Sealing it entirely might require an hour or more.
At least we don’t have anything else to do. Unless the last of these scum cause trouble like this. God, I hate being a pessimist.

***

Cassie copied Gil's data to her tablet, ensuring they had it on two devices. Heat once again led the way, moving into the next room. It looked much like the last with the exception of a stairway going down to the left and another door opposite them. Nothing else occupied the area but none of them moved beyond the threshold.

The doors hissed behind them as soon as Gil stepped through.

"Really tired of that," Heat muttered. "So what's next, guys? So far, they tested our coordination, gave us a bunch of information and now we're looking at some stairs. You don't think this is straightforward, do you? A chance to just … I dunno … walk somewhere without having to jump through some hoops?"

"If hoops appear," Gorman said, "I'm going to punch you in the head."

Vincent stepped forward. "Your color commentary is not helpful." He turned to Gil and Cassie. "Anything?"

Cassie conducted a scan and shrugged. "Nothing like the last two times. I think we're good."

Gil nodded. "I agree. We should simply be able to cross the room and head down. That is where the energy reading is located. I do hope we find an easy way to shut it off."

"I don't know," Heat said. "I'm more worried about getting out of here when we're done. Come on." He set out across the room but roughly halfway there, he stopped suddenly, cocking his head to the side. "Do you guys hear that?"

Cassie strained, listening carefully but the silence made her ears ache. She ran another quick scan but the walls prevented her from gathering anything. "I don't … What is it?"

"Movement." Heat gestured to the opposite door. "Over there. I swore I heard something."

"You've got damn fine hearing then," Vincent replied.

Gorman lifted his weapon, moving closer to the stairs. "Everyone start down the stairs. It's the only cover we've got."

Cassie put her tablet back in her pack and drew her weapon, hustling with the others. They went halfway down before they heard the door

hiss open. “Contact!” Heat shouted, firing his weapon. Shouts broke out in the room and total chaos ensued. Energy blasts splashed against the walls, causing no damage and the two marines went on the attack.
Vincent grabbed her arm and dragged her down to a landing. The stairs doubled back, leading to an area beneath the room above. “Let’s see if we can find what we’re looking for down here.”
“We have to help!” Cassie cried. “Do you know how many they’re dealing with?”
“No, I didn’t see,” Vincent replied. “But we have to get the Gnosis freed. If we engage in a fight up there and all die, then we condemn the entire ship. Come on, Gil! Move it!”
Gil didn’t hesitate, plunging into the darkness. Cassie followed, albeit reluctantly. Heat and Gorman called to one another, some kind of battle order but she had no idea what it meant. The shooting continued, quick bursts mixed with the hum of beam weapons. She felt like one of them should’ve remained with the marines.
We don’t even know what we’re going to find down here! We could be walking into another fight.
Lights came on overhead as if motion sensitive. Thick pillars took up the center of the room, each one stuck into the floor and ceiling. At first, they appeared to be for support but it quickly became apparent they were like the panel that came out of the wall, this culture’s version of a computer system.
“I do believe we have found the central control area,” Gil said. “However, I am not sure how we are going to access these or which one would be most beneficial.”
“Good question.” Cassie glanced back at the stairs. “Vincent, we need coverage while we work.”
“I’m on it.” Vincent hurried back. “Just … Let me know if you need me over there.”
“Will do.” Cassie withdrew her tablet again and peered at it, unsure how to proceed. She tried a scan but it came back with nothing. Tapping one of the columns with her foot didn’t help either. Gil examined one nearby, running his fingers along the surface. He seemed unusually calm considering the conflict going on above them.

Cassie struggled to keep her mind on the task at hand. Every instinct screamed at her to think tactically, to take cover and remove the violent threat above. The pillar terminals would make good cover should they need it and they weren't working immediately anyway. Perhaps the attack was another test.

The doors didn't close until they all entered the room and the next section did not become available without completing a task. Even though they arrived at the terminals, they hadn't completed the goals set by the creators. Whether these beings were present or not didn't matter. They somehow set this process in motion and it needed to be completed.

"Wait!" Cassie called to Gil. "We're not going to be able to turn these on. Not yet."

"What do you mean?" Gil cocked his head, brows furrowed. "We simply need to find the proper switches."

"No," Cassie said, "think back to the tile room … and the one with the terminal. The doors didn't open until we completed the puzzle and discovered more information about the people who lived here before. They were tests and this is no different. Those people fighting upstairs were admitted when we were on our way to the stairs."

"You believe they are somehow part of this …" Realization washed over Gil's face. "And perhaps we are part of theirs."

"Exactly! They must've gone through something else as well and now, we're facing off."

Vincent cursed. "And it's winner take all. Damn it!" He started up the stairs. "We'd better hurry. I'd hoped we could just hold them off and free the ship. I should've known nothing was so easy in this place."

***

When the door opened, Heat knew the situation was bad. He darted for the stairs, opening fire as he moved. The first person to bolt through the door took a full burst to the chest. He flopped on the ground and his fellows hopped over the body, shooting back as they moved.

Heat reached the stairs, moving down two steps to give himself a little breathing room. When Gorman opened up, it kept the enemy from advancing and they instead moved closer to the wall. This meant to shoot at each other, they had to lean out or around the stairs and that caused a form of stalemate.

I guess we're lucky they didn't finish their charge, Heat thought. He counted six enemies besides the one he already took out. The others rushed downstairs to free the Gnosis, meaning he and Gorman needed to buy them time. It probably wouldn't be too hard if their opponents wanted to exchange blind shots in an effort to drive them back.

Heat tossed his last grenade around the corner but the moment it hit the ground, he heard it bounce off to the other side of the room. One of those bastards must've kicked it! The explosive popped harmlessly against the wall. It didn't even cause the wall to darken where it went off.

So much for that. Close quarters made it dangerous. Heat felt compelled to go the rest of the way down the stairs and make the enemy follow them. There'd be better cover down there but stray shots might disrupt the efforts to turn off the strange tractor beam. We have to keep them up here for as long as possible.

They took pot shots, leaning their weapons around the corner and peeling off some rounds. Gorman reloaded. Energy blasts hit the walls, surprisingly causing no damage. To that point, their bullets weren't ricocheting either. Whatever substance blocked their scans also seemed to absorb all forms of assault.

I wonder what bombs would've done to this place. Heat dropped to a knee, taking his turn to fire. He nearly jumped out of his skin as Vincent came bursting around the corner below them, pausing on the landing.

"Dude," Gorman grunted. "If we would've been aiming down there, you'd probably be dead."

"Lucky me then," Vincent replied. "Listen, the terminals aren't turning on down here. We think we have to take out those enemies before we can proceed."

"There are six of them," Heat replied. "I guess we can try my plan of

luring them down the stairs."
"Let's do it." Vincent went back down the stairs and Heat exchanged an annoyed look with Gorman.
"Just go, huh?" Heat shrugged. "I guess we might as well. We'll be standing here all day if we don't."
"Go for it." Gorman fired two bursts. "I'll cover you and follow in a moment."
Heat pushed off from the wall and hurried down the stairs, pausing at the landing and aiming up. "I've got your back!" He shouted. "Go!"
Gorman ran down to join him, taking two steps at a time. Two of the enemy gave chase, firing as they came around the corner. Heat depressed the trigger, catching one of them in the gut. Energy beams lit up the area, smacking the walls. Gorman shouted, hitting the landing hard on his shoulder and rolling into the wall.
"Jesus!" Heat finished the other one off and grabbed his companion by the scruff of his shirt, dragging him to the stairs. "I need some cover here! Now!"
Cassie rushed up beside him, pausing for half a moment. "Is he …"
"Aim up those stairs!" Heat shouted, dragging Gorman as carefully down the steps as he could. "Shoot anything that moves, do you understand?"
"I do." Cassie braced herself, holding the pistol steady as she covered his motion.
Gorman struggled to breath, twitching every time his boots tapped the floor from the descent. Heat got him to the bottom and turned to Vincent. "Commander, assist the sergeant."
Vincent dropped to his knees and rolled Gorman over but Heat didn't stay to see what happened next. Cassie's pistol went off and it drew him back to the stairs. He shoved her toward the wall. "Take cover and lean around the corner. Stairs are a tactical nightmare. If they try to come down here, we'll finish them off."
"How many did you get?" Cassie asked.
"Two for sure. That should leave five." Heat aimed down his scope, trying to ignore the strangled grunts of pain from his friend. They'd been on countless missions together. The thought of him dying didn't

even register in Heat's head. Everything Gorman faced, he walked away from. A lucky shot from some bastard alien seemed grossly unfair.

"Don't we have grenades?" Cassie asked.

"I'm out," Heat muttered. "Gorman has his left but I wouldn't count on them after he was shot in the back. That pack got torn up."

Gil joined them with his weapon drawn. "I can now confirm we are unable to proceed while the enemies are still alive."

"How?" Cassie asked.

"The terminals are not working."

Cassie groaned.

"Professional to the end, huh?" Heat shook his head.

Chatter up above broke out between the enemies. They shouted back and forth, carrying on for a good ten seconds. Heat assumed they were speaking Pahxin and he turned to Gil, waiting for the man to translate. He didn't seem worried about it, standing with his weapon aimed up the stairs.

The banter ended as abruptly as it began. Heat exchanged a look with Cassie. She shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, Gil. Spit it out, man." Heat bit back his frustration, trying to keep his cool. "What the hell did they just say?"

"They are going to charge down here and kill us all," Gil replied in an even, calm tone. "Here momentarily."

"Are you serious?" Cassie whacked him in the shoulder. "Don't you think you should've told us that without prompting?"

"I assumed it did not matter," Gil said. "After all, we knew one side or the other had to traverse these stairs to finish the fight. We were not going to be the ones so they would have to do it. And now they will."

Vincent joined them, taking Gil's side to the right. Heat glared at him, waiting for a status update on Gorman. Their eyes met and the commander shook his head. "It's bad, Geoff. I'm sorry. We have to finish this so we can get him back to the ship. If we don't get him to the hospital soon …"

Heat nodded once. "Understood." He directed his gaze up the stairs. "If we kill these bastards, you think the panels will turn on, right?"

“That is the idea,” Gil replied. “The test.”
“Done.” Heat took two of the steps, turning as he walked to aim up the way. His first target presented itself, aiming at the landing. He fired once, catching him in the forehead. The body flopped down, bones cracking on the stone before it fell still.
One of the man’s companions leaned over the rail to return fire but he was rewarded with a bullet to the neck. Heat tried for a second round, missing when the man stumbled out of his line of fire.
Dashing to the landing, he dropped into a crouch. His wounded victim held his neck, pressing a gushing laceration. Heat finished him off and aimed up, looking for the last three. Vincent shouted at him but he ignored the complaint. When the aliens didn’t present themselves, he started up the second flight of stairs, finger poised on the trigger.
A blast hit the wall near Heat’s head. He redirected, firing in that direction without a solid visual. His target leaped in the air, landing on his stomach and rolling to get a shot off. Heat lit him up with two bursts, making his body jerk as bullets riddled his chest and sprayed blood across the floor.
Searing pain lanced through Heat’s body as a blast slammed into his left leg. He dropped to the ground and blind fired, loosing a good ten rounds. Each proved to be a clean miss but he couldn’t reposition for a better shot. The last two enemies approached slowly, their rifles hanging at their sides.
Heat lifted his weapon but one of them stepped on the barrel, holding it against the ground. The one on the left said something in Pahxin, lifting his own gun to take a shot. A loud pop sounded from the stairs and a blood cloud erupted behind the man’s skull. He dropped heavily to the ground as his companion turned a shocked look in the direction of the attack.
Heat slammed his fist into the man’s groin and as he began to bend in pain, another two bullets tore through his chest, ending him.
“Clear!” Heat shouted. “You got ‘em.”
Vincent’s face appeared above his. “You’re a damn idiot, Geoff. What the hell was that?”
“You said Gorman didn’t have a lot of time.” Heat sat up to assess the

damage to his leg. “I didn’t want to waste anymore.”
“You almost got yourself killed.” Vincent sighed. “This looks bad but you’ll live. Jesus Christ.” He turned to Cassie. “We need to figure something out. Carrying both these guys back … We’ll need to communicate with the ship and get some help over here. I doubt Gil can hoist one of them.”
“Just … get the thing off,” Heat said. “Hurry up. I’ll be fine here.”
“The panels are on!” Gil shouted. “I am accessing them now!”
“Finally some good news.” Vincent stood up. “Keep an eye on the door, marine. We’ll be right back.”
“Just make sure Gorman’s okay,” Heat replied. “I’ll hold the position.”
Vincent and Cassie left him alone and Heat dragged himself to the wall. Propping up, he winced at the pain in his leg, finally noting the blackened hole in his upper thigh. It was bigger than his hand and the clothing had melted into it, certainly causing more damage than the initial blast.
Well, that looks awful. Heat mused, turning his attention to the door. I wonder how long this will put me on my back. Something tells me I’ve got some downtime coming. At least I’ll be in good company.
Providing Gorman makes it. Come on, buddy. Hold it together for a little while longer. We’ve got this.

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Chapter 11

Dala Ahnshyr became a pilot to engage in combat. She didn't have any interest in exploring space or visiting other words, only the thrill of fighting other beings and protecting her species. To that end, her assignment to the Stalwart provided her with everything she'd ever wanted.

She'd engaged with the Tol'An, pirates and criminal mercenaries several times. As Morala gave the order to disembark the ship, Dala looked forward to engaging a brand new threat in the middle of nowhere. These enemies would not employ common tactics that were tried and true and therefore required cunning to meet head on.

I shall test myself today. Dala pressed forward, scanning the black ships that were fast approaching. Her readings were blank, meaning they were deflecting her equipment somehow. One more nudge to the challenge facing her. This is certainly going to be an interesting engagement.

The order came to fire at will. Dala engaged her beam weapons, pulling the trigger. Her target dodged aside, flipping in a casual manner that suggested it might be unmanned. They can't possibly have good enough inertial dampeners to protect a pilot from something so … intense.

Enemy vessels began returning fire, blue-green beams lighting up the sky around them. Dala dove, pressing her stick forward while engaging the afterburners. She went low and brought herself back up under the enemy wave. Firing as she went, she caught one in the belly and sent it cascading away to explode off to her left.

A sound erupted over the com, something like a scream but distant. Dala wondered if it was one of her own people but a quick check showed they hadn't lost any of their own fighters. A couple had taken damage but they weren't destroyed. So who's yelling? The sound lasted for a good ten seconds before fading out.

"Did anyone else hear that?" Dala asked over the com.

"I did," Morala replied. "Everyone on tactical must have. Report, is

everyone okay?"
All the pilots reported in, even as Dala had to go on full evasion to avoid a variety of attacks. Someone began pursuing her, following her tail. She flew straight for the enemy capital ship, then dove as she came within a few hundred yards. Turrets popped off a few massive beams in her direction and she rocketed back toward her allies.
Dala's eyes narrowed in concentration as she evaded additional attacks, closing back in on her allies. "Note that the capital ship is willing to risk their own fighters to take us out. I believe I have confirmed these are unmanned vessels. Drones perhaps … but something seems off about it."
"They are too good?" Morala asked. "I'm seeing some amazing maneuvers."
Dala agreed with her. If they were controlled by a centralized location, they must've had pinpoint, instantaneous wireless connectivity. It seemed impossible. The Pahxin's technology was incredible and even they experienced lag and delay in service. Each one might have been equipped with an individual computer but the cost would've been enormous.
It's cheaper to put a body in a ship than it is to gear it up for independent flight. Dala took a shot to her left flank, her shields dropping to sixty percent. She braced herself for an uncomfortable motion and spun the ship in place, timing her shot as she made a complete circle. Unfortunately, her pursuer was flying slightly above her and she cleanly missed.
Another Pahxin ship flew by, weapons hot. They were firing beams long before Dala flew under them and her pursuing ship winked off the radar. Another odd scream hit the com and this time, it caused her forehead to ache. Wincing, Dala maneuvered back into an attack position, trying to put the pain out of her mind.
"There it is again," Morala said. "Does anyone have a lock on where that's coming from?"
Several voices sounded off a negative. Dala focused on the task at hand, re-engaging. If these things attacked the Gnosis, she figured the Earth ship must've been destroyed. The thought of it angered her. In

the short amount of time she got to fly with Dennis Arden, she respected him. The thought of him dying at the hands of an unmanned vessel felt wrong.

One of the Pahxin ships to Dala's right exploded suddenly, taken out by concentrated fire by three different attackers. Heading back into the fray, Dala dropped missiles and countermeasures, throwing enough of a mess to interfere with any conventional scanners. If these were AI devices, she hoped they'd be confused.

The missiles began chasing targets and they actually ran away. There's an intelligence guiding those but they're incredible! Avoiding those missiles like that? One of them led the ordnance on a merry chase before it climbed at the wrong moment. The missile connected with the engines, plowing right through the shields and taking it out.

The other managed to pull ahead of its pursuer then flipped suddenly enough to lose the lock. It blasted the missile and returned to the fight, instantly shooting at another target. They are definitely not to be taken lightly. I hope the Stalwart can finish off the larger ship quickly or we'll be out here for the better part of two shifts.

Dala re-engaged, throwing everything she had into the fight. Even as other Pahxin ships suffered heavy damage, they pressed on, exchanging fire and destruction. Several pilots ejected, others weren't so lucky but as the conflict raged on, so too did the massive batteries from the capital ships brighten the entire system with their own knock out battle.

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Ulian looked over the combat statistics, frowning at the numbers. Based on the data, they could not win a battle of attrition. Nor did he want to commit to the level of sacrifice the simulations suggested would be required for a victory. They'd already lost several fighters, including some of their pilots.

Shields held against the enemy attacks but the concussion from their strikes caused system failures. He hadn't seen beam weapons hit so hard through defenses before. The culture they were facing had much

he'd like to study and understand. Unfortunately, it seemed they would have to destroy their opponents to end the violence.
Further attempts to hail them failed. Morala postulated they were battling an AI following a specific set of programming. One thing contradicted the idea. The reports of screaming over the com whenever one of the enemy fighters exploded gave some indication that organic sentience was involved.
Unless someone programmed these machines to feel the loss of one of their fellows, I suppose. But that doesn't make sense. Their tactics have not changed so they're not doubling their efforts for revenge.
Ulian stared at the screen, looking at the vessel they were bombarding with near constant attacks. I need another strategy to pull this off.
"Sir," Viran said, breaking his concentration. "I've got a report from our shuttle. They have found the Gnosis!"
"Where?"
"They are on the surface of the third planet, seemingly intact. Our ship is reading life forms so they must've survived." Viran paused. "They're suggesting they may have crashed but aren't seeing the typical signs of such an impact. Our pilot is requesting permission to approach and make contact with them."
"How long will it take for them to get there?" Morala asked. "Surely, they're not suggesting a several-hour-long voyage."
"They can make contact in just shy of ten hours if they head out right now."
Ulian shook his head. "Out of the question and unnecessary. Who knows what will happen to them in that amount of time? No, have them return to the ship immediately. What would it take for us to make an intersystem hyperspace trip to that planet?"
"I have the coordinates," Erda replied. "I can set a course but we need to move away from this attacking vessel. We can't do it while under attack."
"Certainly." Ulian stood up, contemplating the situation. The ship shook from another series of attacks. His mind once again drifted back to the numbers. They needed to do something extreme if they hoped to succeed. Perhaps we've hurt them more than we know or maybe

they are protecting a specific part of space. “Viran, was the Gnosis attacked?”
“Sir?” Viran asked.
“Did the shuttle note damage? Did the Gnosis get attacked by this ship we’ve engaged?”
“I don’t believe so,” Viran said. “The report shows that the Gnosis is on the surface but they didn’t see appreciable damage. Certainly not enough to suggest a crash due to combat. They even have power still, albeit not much. I don’t know the cause but we have to get closer for me to make a determination.”
Ulian smirked. “Our bad luck.” He shook his head. “Recall all fighters. Tell me when they’re aboard.”
Morala joined him, lowering her voice. “Sir, is that a good idea? If we pull back our forces, we’ll have to deal with those fighters.”
“My theory may be wrong,” Ulian replied, “and if it is, I’ll take full responsibility. However, if the Gnosis didn’t engage this ship, then it is likely they came from a different angle. One this guardian wasn’t defending. Since it’s a ten-hour trip across the system, I’m guessing they used to have multiple vessels out here.”
“But … they aren’t all operational anymore.” Morala’s expression lit up as realization hit her. “I think I see your point.”
“If we move beyond the range of what this thing is supposed to defend, then we might be able to make our way toward that planet and avoid further conflict.” Ulian held up a hand. “However, it may also be that once they engage something, they will remain on them until the battle ends.”
“What will we do then?” Morala asked.
“Lure them to a section of this system advantageous to us.” Ulian brought up a star chart and put it on the screen. “We’ve already mapped the system out. Debris would help. Something along those lines. Anything that can be used to cause some damage beyond our weapons.”
“I have an idea,” Morala said. “I believe our shuttles are all equipped with warheads.”
“Yes?” Ulian frowned. “What’re you considering?”

“The ship out there right now. If we can get them to an asteroid, something large enough for them to practically land on, they can lace it with whatever warheads they have on board. Giving it a shove toward our enemy, their shields won’t likely be able to deflect such an object.”
“At which point we would detonate inside their shields.” Ulian shook his head. “You do have unconventional thinking … but how to find the right piece of debris in a timely fashion?” He pointed to the chart. “This looks like a cloud of such rubbish. Erda, set course for that. Viran, tell our shuttle to redirect. Morala will explain.
“When all our fighters are on board, adjust heading and initiate full speed for that destination. We have a plan now, people. Execute it so we can get back to the primary reason we came all the way out here in the first place. I’m certain the Gnosis would like a hand to get home. I intend to give them the aide regardless of the opposition.”

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Cassie rushed over to Gil, peering over his shoulder at the computer screen. English flew across the screen, continually stuck on the word protocol. Gil typed in numbers and combinations of letters, various combinations that made no sense. A message kept popping up saying denied.
Vincent took the other side and groaned at what he saw, shoulders slumping. “What’s happening?”
“They are on,” Gil replied. “I did not say they were easily accessed.”
Vincent rubbed his eyes. “You’re killing me here.”
“No …” Gil paused just long enough to give the commander a confused look. “I am attempting to access the system. There is a huge difference. I do not believe any of my current activities would result in directly ending your life or that of Agent Alexander’s for that matter. We should all be safe.”
“That’s not what he meant,” Cassie said. “Give me a shot at this, Gil.”
The doctor stepped aside and Cassie drew out her tablet, scanning the terminal. Readings came back indicating power but not much more.

Once again, the casing of the device defended it against any direct tampering. She typed directly into the device, feeling a chill at the fact the keyboard was appropriate for her language.

“I don’t understand how it changes the language based on who’s looking at it,” Cassie muttered. “How’s it work? Do you think it scans our brainwaves and just … knows?”

“Sentient computer technology makes sense,” Gil replied. “The Orbs use it and if all this was created with the knowledge gleaned from such data, then yes, it would simply know. When I made my attempts, it allowed me to use Pahxin words and language. It did not matter because I still did not get through the surface security.”

Protocol. The word bothered Cassie. It wasn’t asking for credentials to log in. She sensed a question of sorts, like it was a challenge. Something to counter, much like a night watchman preventing entry into a military camp. A blinking cursor sat below the word, the place where Gil had plugged in random characters.

“What were you writing in here?” Cassie asked. “When you tried all those characters.”

“Math … probability … statistics.” Gil shrugged. “Universal languages ultimately. Things that would be accepted anywhere, essentially.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Cassie hummed. “I think this is another puzzle, not a password to a terminal.”

“Lovely,” Vincent said. “Can you crack it?”

“I’m not sure what it means. Protocol.” Cassie closed her eyes. “There’re too many meanings for the word. Maybe an antonym?” She typed in the word disagreement. Denied flashed on the screen. “Okay, not that. Hm. What about a sort of synonym?”

“Like what?” Vincent asked. “Rules?”

“Bureaucracy.” Cassie typed it in. The screen froze for a moment and another word appeared. Feline. Cassie felt like someone had thrown a glass of water in her face. “Um … what the hell? Why’d it change to that?”

“Maybe you were right,” Vincent said. “Try cat?”

Cassie typed it in but the word denied appeared. “This is weird. Um … furry?” She tried that and the computer once again froze. When it

unlocked, another word appeared. This time, Forest showed up. She immediately typed bushes. It switched to another, fruit. “Apple,” she muttered, plugging it in.
The word changed to war.
“How are you doing this?” Gil asked. “I do not understand your choices.”
“I’m doing word association,” Cassie replied. She input death into the computer. The next word was freedom. Cassie typed captivity.
Vincent huffed. “If a psychologist was reading these, I’d hate to know what they’d think of your choices.”
“I’m sure apple was fine,” Cassie replied. “You want to try?”
Vincent shook his head. “No, you’re doing great … I hope.”
Immortal came on the screen next and Cassie replied with boredom. This time, the computer began to flash, bright white then dark over and over, increasing in speed until it became a strobe. The three of them stepped back, giving it some space. Each pillar around them began to flash as well, syncing up.
“Maybe you offended it,” Vincent said. “Boredom might’ve been the wrong answer.”
“There’s no way to guess what the right one would’ve been.” Cassie looked around. “If we’re in trouble, I doubt there’s much we can do about it.”
Gil gestured to his tablet. “My scanner is showing a massive energy build up. I believe we have found the device holding the Gnosis in place! It is right here … or I should say it is coming.”
“You don’t think it’s sentient, do you?” Vincent asked. “That the thing holding us here is not a device but a being?”
“We will know soon.”
The floor parted some distance away, stone grinding against stone as it moved. A moment passed and a case ten feet long and five feet wide appeared. The smooth black metal gleamed in the low light but as the ground settled, blue lights erupted all over it. Cassie turned to the others before approaching.
“What’re you doing?” Vincent reached for her but Gil stopped him.
“Let me go! We have no idea what that thing is or what it’s capable

of!”
“It does not matter,” Gil replied. “One of us needs to examine it. This is what we came here to turn off. She can scan it just as easily as we can. Give her some space. In the event that it causes us damage, only one should be sacrificed to find out.”
“You callous ass!” Vincent called out to Gil. “Don’t do it, Cassie! Come on, we can scan it from here!”
“I think I’m good,” Cassie replied. “Don’t worry. This is definitely what’s been emitting the power readings but I don’t feel any warmth. How is it venting the excess power?” She paused, looking at her tablet. It suggested the device was performing at one-hundred percent efficiency. “This is impossible.”
“Perhaps not,” Gil said. “Look for a control panel. You may be lucky and figure out their security on that device as well.”
“I’m not sure the last one was luck.” Cassie hesitated a moment and shrugged. “Trial and error maybe … not really luck. But this thing doesn’t seem to have any access points at all. It’s smooth all over, the same black metal the doors are made of. At least it isn’t blocking my scans, not entirely at least.”
A hum filled the air, a brief vibration that gave way to words. They emanated from the walls and floor, turning all the stone in the building into an amplifier. “We no longer care about your devices.” Even with all that volume, the voice came out soft but not quite inviting. There was a menace just below the surface.
“Are you … Are you alive?” Cassie asked.
“Far more so than you are,” came the reply, “though perhaps not as much at the same time. We have transcended the concept of life and death, ends and beginnings. There is no more chronology, only perpetuity. Sameness. Consistency. Doom for intellect. Stagnation for the restless.”
“You have evolved,” Gil said. “Moved beyond your physical forms after all. Are you stored in this device then?”
“Stored. A primitive view but accurate enough for your understanding. You have passed our tests, crude as they were. You have seen the evidence of our previous living. And now you stand

before our greatest accomplishment and prison. Eternity through science and total awareness of our surroundings, which never change."

Vincent sighed. "Love your curiosity, folks, but I think we have a more pressing matter. Why did you drag our ship down to the surface? Why are you holding us here and how do we get you to let us go?"

"An interesting query from a pragmatic mind." The voice seemed to laugh but the sound felt simulated, as if mirth itself was merely a remembered state rather than a felt emotion. "Your kind calls this cutting to the chase, do they not? Where you will learn of your fate rather than dally on the chance there is no future."

"You know why I asked," Vincent said. "Will you answer? Unless you let us go, we don't have time to chat."

"Yes, though we must admit your crew has done far better than the last two ships to come here. They were drained of all power within four hours of arrival. One did not think to use their defenses as you did and damaged themselves beyond repair. The secrets they sought would never have been theirs anyway. Their thinking is too immature. Too zealous."

Cassie cast a quick look at Vincent, her eyes pleading with him to stop. He nodded to her but it was clear he wanted to continue. She cleared her throat. "What were you going to do with them? They couldn't have lasted forever."

"We are the only things to linger so long. But they provided us entertainment while they were present. They fought with one another and foraged for survival. They tried to gain entrance to this facility multiple times. Those you slew got the closest but even they were stuck for a time. Every day they tried again and each night they returned failures."

"So you what, just watched them?" Cassie frowned. "I don't understand. Why didn't you work with them? Speak to them as you are us now?"

"We only speak to those who are worthy of our voice. If you have reached this chamber, you have achieved the right. Though if we are to be honest, watching is far more exciting than explaining. Seeing

how you will react, what you will do with different challenges, it is thrilling. As the mercenaries and zealots closed on you, the defenses were stunning."

"How do you perceive these things?" Cassie asked.

"Through every eye on the planet. We observe. The birds, the creatures, even your own people. We watched as the warrior on top of the ship was injured and one of his potential saviors died. We saw the explosion that tore through the mercenaries on board your vessel and how their own device ripped a hole in the hull. Even now, you work to repair it thinking you can leave."

"Thinking?" Gil queried. "Do you mean to say we may not?"

"There are many more trials to put you through. Tests and games. We will thrive off of you for quite some time and relish the memories for the countless years to come. We cannot let you leave this planet. Even now we are driving another ship in this direction and when it arrives we shall bring it down as well. Countless mines to satiate our thirst for something new."

"You can't do this!" Vincent shouted. "It's not your place to cage people, to turn them into your … playthings!"

"What precisely can you do about it?" The voice paused for only a moment, clearly not expecting an answer. "We have disabled your ship. Your hand devices and smaller vessels can do no harm to this facility. If you think there is some sort of escape, you are wrong. This is the end of your lives, little creature. You have but to struggle until you accept."

"What happens then?" Cassie asked.

"You die. Those without hope lose our interest quickly. But do not worry. Your minds clearly do not surrender easily and as you continue to believe in your chances, we will be eternally grateful … Or until we have forgotten this particular event just as we have so many before."

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Chapter 12

Desmond snapped out of his thoughts when Zach called his name.
“Sir, it appears the intruders are on deck eight. They’re attempting to access the elevator to the bridge. I think they’re planting explosives.” He paused. “Yes, my scans show a detonator and some kind of timer.”
“Wonderful.” Desmond turned to Salina. “Do we have anyone in that area?”
“Not at the moment,” Salina replied. “I’ve dispatched them and they’re on their way. The marines are outside while engineering seals up the hull breach. Also, power drain has continued. We’re down to less than two hours of power before it goes.”
“That seems fast.”
Salina nodded. “I’m afraid it sped up. Even with every safeguard we’ve put into place. I’ve turned off every nonessential system, which is precisely why we’re all burning up in here.”
Desmond had been able to ignore the heat for a while but it definitely remained oppressive. He looked at his computer and rubbed his eyes when even it had been shut off. The screen was dimmed down to the lowest setting, providing a faded look at the area around the damaged part of the ship.
We’re not sitting ducks here. Pretty much no better off than the two ships who came before us. Desmond clasped his hands behind his back. “Just for fun, try to hail Vincent and the others.”
“Yes, sir.” Salina started speaking quietly into the microphone, her voice providing a rhythmic noise breaking up the otherwise mostly silent room. Zach and Deacon sat near the door with their weapons, lingering beside the security guards. There was nothing for them to do until the beam shut off.
And right now, it looks like it won’t matter. The efforts were wasted. I probably sent those people to die in some alien facility. Though at least they will have met their end trying to save us rather than huddled back here. How long will we be able to survive after the lights go out? I suppose it depends on when the next ship gets dragged

down.
Desperation gnawed at him. He considered shutting off the rest of the systems, turning off everything that drew power to see if he might be able to trick their captors into lowering the beams. Even if it worked, they could just as easily crank the tractor back on and drag them down.
That's not the answer. We can't get out of the atmosphere fast enough. Bombers might take on the facility but they were fairly convinced doing so wouldn't cause enough damage to kill the power generators below ground. The stone itself wasn't able to be scanned. Even if they leveled the place, the chances were good they'd simply trap their own people inside.
"I need some ideas, people. Thoughts. We're at the eleventh hour here with some serious pieces of work literally at our door. It's now or never."
Deacon said, "we could try venting some of our remaining power. Maybe we can overload the beam holding us in place."
"That won't work," Salina replied. "That beam has plenty of capacity. Overloading it would take twice our reactor when it's at full strength."
"Okay, so that's one idea," Desmond said. "Zach?"
"We might have to assume our team is gone. Drop everything we've got on that facility. Bombers, fighters, just tear it up." Zach shrugged. "It's not exactly eloquent but with all that firepower, we'd have to make some kind of dent."
Salina shook her head. "The stone … Our scans may not have gone through much but the density of that stone is clear. Attacking that place will just waste resources at this point."
"Then what've you got in mind?" Desmond asked. "You can't shoot down every idea without at least one of your own."
"We give our people a little more time. I … am willing to go on faith that they're still there and will get that device off."
"If you're wrong," Zach said, "we'll find ourselves sitting here in the dark having done nothing."
"We've done plenty," Salina replied. "If there were an alternative, I'd be the first to get behind it."

An explosion rocked the ship, vibrating the deck. Desmond moved to Salina's station and switched the screen to deck eight. It flickered on, showing the mercenaries gathered around the breached door. They started filing in, climbing up the ladder toward the bridge. The last one leaned in and took a bullet in the back as security arrived.
Better late than never.
One of the Gnosis security dashed to the door, aiming his weapon inside and firing twice. Beams lit up the shaft. Desmond heard the gunfire echoing in the shaft. Switching through the different decks, two men disembarked on six and were aiming down, ready to take out anyone that followed.
Desmond clicked on the com and linked up with the security. "Do not pursue. They've got the area covered from six. Repeat, do not pursue. Dispatch additional units to six and two right away."
Security at the door moved away when sparks began to pop through the seam. "Here they come, sir."
The deck began to hum, a noise Desmond hadn't heard before. At first, he was convinced it was some kind of cutting device but then he noticed the numbers over the elevator were climbing. Oh my God.
Men started shouting in the shaft. The sparks stopped as the car came crashing through the ranks.
Bones snapped and the screams were cut short as the doors opened.
No one said anything but all eyes fell on Salina. She lifted her shoulders. "It seemed like the best way to keep them out."
"So it was, Salina." Desmond nodded slowly. "So it was. Coordinate the repairs and a cleanup crew. We'll focus on tidying up here and give the team more time. Seems like the best plan we've got."

***

The Stalwart hit full speed, moving to meet their shuttle craft. Their opponent gave chase and their fighters disengaged completely. Ulian kept an eye on his console's computer, watching reports scroll through. He wanted to know their plot was ready, that the warhead was in place and prepped to hit the target.

If their attack did not work, if they didn't slow the enemy down at the very least, he would have to make a command decision to leave and get reinforcements. Part of him thought he had already exceeded his standard orders concerning opposition. One ship shouldn't have given them so much trouble but then again, they rarely encountered superior technology.

The enemy's use of power showed they were highly advanced but they also knew how to apply it. Those shields were nearly impenetrable and their little fighters were deadly. Ulian didn't believe they were automated but he didn't want to speculate what that meant exactly. Remote control was not the answer. It was definitely something else.

Morala leaned close, letting him know the shuttle had found a piece of debris big enough to do what they wanted. The crews were in place, attaching the warheads. Their estimated time to completion was less than ten minutes and the enemy would be in position within twenty so they were cutting it a bit close.

"We'll have some directional control with the rock," Morala said. "But not much. Once the shuttle gets it moving, we'll be able to nudge with the warhead's thrusters. I'd say a few degrees. Hopefully, they've never considered this particular tactic before. I sincerely doubt they'll have a contingency plan."

"They'll probably just shoot at it," Erda said.

"Possibly," Ulian replied. "And if so, then we'll need to get out of here. But if they don't … Well, we'll just have to see what happens next."

As the Stalwart continued on, they remained far enough ahead to make any attacks useless. Beams weren't overly efficient in a running battle but they could get the job done when one ship could overtake the other. While the enemy did have advantages, their engines were not as fast or efficient as the Pahxin design.

They closed in on the shuttle, Morala watching the tactical read out on her screen. "Shuttle one, I'm giving you a countdown of five … four … three … two … one. Fire your thrusters."

Ulian turned his attention to the screen, watching as the shuttle powered up its engines and gave the rock a good shove. Once it was in motion, the warheads kicked in, giving it a little boost. The motion

picked up speed, the momentum carrying it straight into the path of the enemy ship.

They didn't even bother to turn their cannons in the direction of the rock and it slammed into the shields, causing the entire array to light up blue. The warheads detonated but not within the defenses of the enemy ship. Even so, their defenses flared and Viran slapped his console. "Their shields are down!"

"Fire everything," Ulian ordered. "Hit them hard while they're still down, Erda."

Stalwart turrets turned and opened up, laying into the bow of their pursuer. The hull took the full brunt of the attack and micro explosions danced about the surface. Viran shook his head. "Minor damage … That metal is something else. Not quite armor … but there's some kind of substance, the same thing that blocked our scans … It's tough."

"Keep firing." Ulian stood up. "They can't take it forever."

Another two volleys hammered the vessel and it suddenly began to slow. "They're altering course," Erda said. "Heading back toward their original position. Do we give chase, sir?"

Ulian considered the question for a moment and shook his head. "No, we need to get to the Gnosis and see if they require assistance."

Morala clenched her fist beside him. "Sir, begging your pardon but the enemy is at our mercy. We should not leave them to repair. We may not get another shot at taking them out if they restore their shields. They will certainly not make that mistake a second time."

"Our primary mission is to check on the Earth vessel," Ulian replied. "Don't you think they require our attention more?"

"If we have to help them repair their ship, we cannot do so with this thing flying around." Morala shook her head. "So no, I believe our primary mission is to secure this space then assist the humans."

Ulian considered her comments and finally nodded. "Point taken. Erda, plot an intercept course and keep us tight with them. Have the shuttle rendezvous at our original coordinates. We'll take out the enemy first."

Erda turned them about and engaged the thrusters, bringing them

back to full speed. The enemy had a bit of a head start but it wasn't hard to catch up. "When you're in range," Ulian said, "open fire. If we hit their engines, perhaps we can disable their craft and go for a reactor kill."

The weapons fired again, this time the front cannons as well. Blasting away at the engines, one of the two massive thrusters flashed then went dark. With only one left, they began to slow and Erda dropped the Stalwart down so they wouldn't collide with their target. He didn't let up, hitting them again until the ship stopped moving.

Fighters launched from the enemy ship, coming in for a harassing attack. "Don't bother with them," Morala said. "Continue hammering our primary target."

As a seemingly last ditch effort, the enemy began to fire back, slapping the Stalwart's shields. "Their power has decreased considerably," Viran said. "Those blasts … They barely scratched the surface of our defenses. Their reactor is at ten percent of what it was when we first started the engagement."

"Is it dropping?" Ulian asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Erda, pull us back," Ulian ordered. "Now, get us as far away from that thing as you can. If it blows, that reactor still might have enough life in it to cause some serious damage."

The Stalwart pulled back and turned, amidst the mini attacks from the fighters. Each of their attacks did little more than nudge the shields, not even getting through to cause a tremor near the decks they were after. As the Pahxin craft moved away, the fighters disengaged, their engines shutting down. The crafts themselves began to drift.

"Do you see that?" Morala pointed. "They're … Are they giving up?"

"No," Viran replied. "There's no power left in any of them. They're offline."

"Maybe it's not going to blow up after all," Erda said. "It probably doesn't have the juice to do more than whimper."

"We'll give them a moment to ensure they're not playing dead," Ulian said. "But if we don't see any activity in a few moments, we need to move out. Keep me informed of your scans, Viran. We need a proof of

defeat as soon as possible. I'm sure the Gnosis would like to get out of here sooner rather than later."

***

Cassie continued to examine the tube, looking for anything which might give her a hint as to how to defeat these supposedly unbeatable aliens. Their telepathy made it seem impossible to do anything about the current situation. This wasn't merely better technology, it was advanced evolution, a stage of development leaving humans and Pahxin way behind.

But there still has to be something we can do. I refuse to believe their rhetoric about no hope. Cassie struggled with a sense of naivety. She had to question the conflict raging in her heart. Were these beings creating the emotions she felt? Or did they merely predict them? How much control could they exert over thinking beings?

They're so far beyond morality now they've forsaken it entirely. Watching people suffer and die for sport, to alleviate boredom was simply monstrous and that's just what they've become. Monsters.

A loud beeping made her look up suddenly. Vincent called her name but she couldn't hear what he said afterward over the shrill, rhythmic pulse. She stood, noting that the tube began to glow blue. A massive spark caught her in the stomach, sending her flying across the room. As she hit the floor and slid into the wall, she nearly blacked out from the pain.

Cassie's spine complained when she connected with the stone and she rolled to her side, drawing her knees to her chest. Vincent joined her, running a quick scan before he touched her arm. "Hey! You're okay, nothing's broken. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah …" Cassie rasped, nodding her head. "It … shocked the hell out of me."

"No …" The voice spoke, lacking all emotion but somehow there was still a hint of fear layered in the tone. "No. The vessel. They have caused catastrophic damage. Our ship. Our salvation never realized … stuck … damaged … ruined. How could they have done this? The

surprise is … absolutely intoxicating!"
"We must absorb this," the voice seemed to answer itself, carrying on a conversation. "Witness the battle again. The recordings are intact. We can experience it again and see how we failed. Oh, to fail again! We remember it as being bad but it feels wonderful. Like a narcotic of the soul."
"This is getting weird," Vincent said. "Gil? You got anything?"
Gil began to speak but Gorman interrupted. He looked ghastly, his skin pale and his eyes sunken in his head. Still, he managed to get to his knees and dislodged his pack. Two grenades sat in front of him and he armed each. "You guys … better go …"
"What the hell are you doing?" Vincent asked. "Just throw them and go."
"You know that's not going to work," Gorman said. "Cassie got shocked by that shield. You don't think they can get rid of these? I've got a plan but you need to get moving. Grab her and get out. Trust me. I'll do my best to follow you out."
"You damn well better, Sergeant!" Vincent shouted. "Gil, let's go."
"This is suicide," Gil said to Gorman. "You do realize that."
"I'm hoping not," Gorman replied. "But if it happens … Well … Let's hope I make a difference. You better hurry. These freaks aren't going to be distracted with their failure for long and you probably should be on your way before stuff starts to blow up. At least, that's what I usually like to say."
"Come on." Vincent picked Cassie up, making her wince. He ran for the stairs, each step causing her pain.
She had to be able to walk before they got to Heat. He needed more help than she did so she started flexing her legs. At the first landing, she tapped Vincent, demanding he let her down. He complied and she held the rail, climbing as quickly as she could. Every nerve ending tingled but she fought through the discomfort.
Heat looked up. "Where's Gorman?"
"He's taking care of something," Vincent grunted, lifting the man up. He groaned as he hoisted Heat onto his shoulder. "You're a heavy man, Sergeant. We've got to go."

“We can’t go without him!” Heat shouted. “We have to go back!”
“I’ll explain to you why this happened later.” Vincent hustled toward the open door. “For now, I’ve got to get as many of us out of here alive as I can. Cassie, Gil … stay right with me. God knows if those doors are going to close on us and we do not want to be separated. Move fast and do not fall behind. This will probably get dangerous.”

***

Gorman watched them get to the stairs before popping both grenades and cooking them for two seconds. They had a five second total delay. Once he reached the halfway mark, he stumbled a few steps toward the strange tube then threw himself at it. Passing through a tingly field, he landed hard on the ground, extending both arms out over his head.
He almost reached the bottom of the unit and he shoved the grenades the last few feet. A beam of energy lifted him in the air and tossed him back, just as he’d seen happen to Cassie. But the grenades remained in place. He didn’t even hit the ground before the two explosions went off, causing massive cracks to appear in the unit.
Whatever happened to make it start talking about failure must’ve distracted them enough to make the damage work. The blue light became bright then a wide field went in all directions. Gorman hit the ground and slid into the wall, but the pain didn’t even register. He knew what was about to happen.
He had three seconds before it made contact with him and he drew a deep, painful breath. When the light hit his feet, he felt a surge of energy. It lasted half a moment, an excruciating few seconds that faded into a peaceful, silent blackness.

***

“Sir!” Salina shouted. “The beam is off! We’re freed!”
“What?” Desmond stood up. “What’s happening at the facility? What about our power?”

Salina paused. “Generators are online and powering back up! They did it! They actually did it!”
“Yes!” Zach and Deacon cheered, giving each other a high five.
Desmond slumped in his chair, relief washing over him in waves. He couldn’t believe they’d pulled it off, connecting a Hail Mary if he’d ever seen one. The screen came back on, bright and full of color. It depicted the facility as bouts of blue flame erupted through the sides.
“Holy Crap …” Desmond muttered. “God, I hope they’re getting out of there.”
“Scans are functional,” Salina replied. “I’m picking up life forms. Wait! I’ve got them on the com! Commander Bowman is on the com!”
“Vincent!” Desmond shouted. “Can you hear me?”
“We’re in a bad way, sir!” Vincent shouted back. “I think we’re able to talk because the roof’s mostly come down but we’re trying to get out! We need evac! Can you get someone here quick?”
Desmond frowned. “Fighters are airborne now. They should be able to bring you back.”
“Get them here now then because I have a bad feeling this whole section of the planet’s about to sink.”
Desmond switched the com over to Mustang One. “Dennis, I need you guys to do a pick up. I know you’re not really suited but this is an emergency. Make it happen.”
“We’re on our way.”
The screen shifted perspective, catching the fighters as they flew by. Their engines boomed over the landscape, roaring as they breezed by overhead. They’d arrive at the facility in a few seconds. They’d have to load the passengers into their small cargo area, uncomfortable but better than the alternative.
“Good luck, guys.” Desmond clasped his hands together tightly, forcing himself to be patient as the drama unfolded.

***

Vincent took them through the open door from where the Tol’An had come. They found a couple bodies out there, dead on strange spikes

sticking out of the walls. I'm glad we didn't encounter that particular test. The thought fleeted quickly as the ground shook. The explosion rocked the entire place and sections of the walls and ceiling started falling.

Once the stone crumbled, it was as if the entire structure was designed of a single organ that failed all at once. While it seemed impenetrable before, now it had more in common with a dried up cookie falling on the floor. Cracks appeared everywhere and the doors collapsed, granting them access to get outside.

Thank God for that at least.

Vincent carried on his conversation with Desmond, getting the pilots on their way. Cassie and Gil remained close behind but it wasn't hard for them. Carrying Heat really slowed Vincent down. The marine was heavy as hell and he complained a lot. The one good thing about all the noise around them was that none of them heard what he had to say.

They burst into the courtyard through a busted up section of wall and didn't stop until they were near the trees again. The panels leading up to the stairs cracked and trembled, falling into the ground and burying the facility. Gorman! Vincent scowled, feeling sick to his stomach. He knew what he was doing … but … my God.

Fighter engines erupted overhead and they saw them fly in, hovering in place. "Commander Bowman," Dennis's voice came through the ear piece. "We're here. There doesn't appear to be a good place to land near the facility at this point. Can you meet us at the clearing roughly … forty yards to the south?"

"We're on our way," Vincent replied. "Come on guys, the pilots can grab us over here."

"We left him!" Heat grumbled. He was too injured to do much more. "We left him there."

"He made the call," Vincent said. "Besides, that wound he had … It was bad, Geoff. I'm not sure he would've made it either way."

"We … should not … have …" Heat passed out, becoming even heavier. Vincent didn't think such a thing was possible.

They headed off to meet their rides to get back to the Gnosis and leave

that planet behind. Oddly enough, their mission had proved successful: keep the artifact out of the hands of the Tol'An. Vincent doubted they'd have been able to use anything on that world anyway, but now there was no point in trying.

One more denial for the zealots, Vincent thought. At another high cost.

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Epilogue

The Gnosis power began to recharge the moment the explosion ended the facility. Life support was restored to full power, engaging the environmental controls. Cool air filled the bridge and the crew began the arduous process of checking every system so they could plan for a safe takeoff.

Desmond visited various departments, finding a number of injuries in the medical bay. They lost several good people, killed in combat or through accidents. He found Lieutenant Fielding, who had nearly lost his left arm. Doctor Holland had to perform surgery and they weren't sure if he'd be able to keep the limb. A day or two would tell for sure. The marine remained unconscious when Desmond arrived but he figured he'd come back to see him later.

Sergeant Heathrow suffered a nasty wound to the leg that would heal up over time. However, the man was deeply moved by the loss of his friend. He was coolly indifferent to Desmond's visit and didn't have much to say about the mission itself. The two had been close since long before joining the Gnosis.

The leg might heal quickly enough but the wound of losing his companion would take considerably longer.

Vincent gave his report concerning the facility and everything they learned. Cassie backed him up and they provided all the data they uncovered from within the facility. Some of it might've benefitted future technology projects. Desmond found it hard to believe that beings pushed themselves beyond the realm of the flesh, into a situation of eternal stagnation.

They invented their own version of hell.

Engineering finished sealing the hull just as the Stalwart arrived in orbit. Ulian contacted Desmond personally and they spoke in the privacy of their respective quarters.

"I see you didn't really need our help after all," Ulian said.

"According to the data," Desmond replied, "you guys made it possible for our people to shut them down here. Your attack on their starship,

the fact you were able to cause so much damage, distracted them. They hadn't been challenged, or lost, in so long it was like a breath of fresh air after living in a sewer."

"Incredible. What a strange discovery. The Tol'An truly know how to play with plasma." Ulian shook his head. "We will escort you out of this system and return to Earth with you. I believe we have vessels stationed there now and I'd personally like to see the home of our new allies."

"Thank you, Ulian. I appreciate you coming all the way out here for us."

"Allies are there for one another. I assume you would do the same." Ulian leaned forward. "Ulian out for now. We will speak again when you attain orbit."

Desmond switched off the com and sat back in his chair, taking a deep breath. As he exhaled, his muscles relaxed and he closed his eyes for a moment. Nothing about their mission played out as he had anticipated, not a single part of it but somehow, despite their casualties, they succeeded.

Maybe not the most graceful way to go about interstellar travel, Desmond thought. But at least we're clawing our way through it one obstacle at a time.

***

Dennis locked his office door and reached out to the Stalwart, getting in touch with their central control. The translator kicked in for him, letting him know he'd reached their bridge and a guy named Viran.

"This is a busy channel," Viran said. "Are you trying to coordinate with us for repair efforts?"

"No," Dennis replied. "I'm checking to see if you have a pilot on board named Dala. Um … Dala Ahnshyr. I believe."

"Yes." Viran paused. "I will see if she is available."

Dennis tapped his foot, trying not to be anxious. Relief hit him as he considered the fact that she was okay. Since they last spoke, they'd been in a couple of different engagements. At least Viran didn't pull

some I regret to inform you thing. Dangerous as their jobs could be, he didn't want to think about the tragedy they faced every time they went out.

"This is Dala." The translator worked again. "Who is this?"

"Dennis," he replied. "Dennis Arden? We … we flew together against the Tol'An when they kidnapped our people?"

"I remember," Dala replied. "I'm glad to hear your voice … that you've survived."

"You too." Dennis hated the fact that confirming they were alive was the way to start a conversation. "I've heard a rumor you are coming to Earth. Do you know if that's true?"

"It is," Dala said. "We will be heading there with you when you've launched."

"Great! Um … Awesome …" Dennis cleared his throat. "I was thinking that when you're there, if you can get clearance, I'd love to show you some things. At least our facility if not more. You know … like ambassador type stuff."

"Truly?" Dala paused. "I … would be interested in doing so."

"Perfect! That's perfect." Dennis bounced in his seat, trying to think of what else to say. A message came over the loud speakers, letting everyone know to clear the com channels for takeoff. Damn it! Horrible timing! "Okay, so we're about to take off but I'll contact you when we get back to Earth."

"Thank you, Dennis Arden," Dala replied. "I will speak to you then."

Dennis flopped into his chair as the line went dead. He didn't know what she looked like, but he absolutely needed to meet her in person. At the very least, he wanted to buy her a drink for all she'd done for him. But he felt there was more to it than that. There was a connection. Even if they hadn't met face to face, he believed it existed. And getting together would prove it one way or another. Besides, the fact they were heading back to Earth with them had to be a sign. He decided he wanted to believe in it, regardless of how naive it might've made him seem.

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Deep Dive: Legacy War Book 5

The terrorist threat of the Tol'An intensifies, forcing humanity and their allies to attempt a desperate experiment in order to gain the upper hand. They know there are additional Orbs somewhere in the galaxy. Finding them is the trick but if they can establish a connection with their own devices, they just might be able to pinpoint their locations.

As they board the Gnosis to attempt their plan, they tighten security and plan for the worst. But not every contingency can be accounted for nor every enemy clearly seen. While the Gnosis is in hyperspace, they are stuck until they emerge, leaving plenty of time to find success and opposition in places where they least expect it.

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Prologue

Beaumont Dulain knew how to influence people. He'd been playing the game his entire adult life, navigating through seas he had no business embarking on. A few forays burned him, but he learned from those mistakes, and having ascended to his current position, the head of the most influential intelligence agency in human history, he considered himself victorious.

Any further up the chain would've dulled his efficiency, his usefulness. He was right in the middle of the action, able to make things happen and alter the course of his entire species providing he remained subtle enough. That became the real trick. As they acquired more and more information about the threats abroad, gentle nudges on policy became less effective.

The AIA *could* push as hard as it needed to. The precedent was there from previous moments where direct action was required to stop a catastrophe. Unfortunately, each time they did so, it revealed a little more of their underlying structure and the way they operated. That made Dulain nervous.

If those in charge discovered too much, they might question the methods. Plausible deniability and intentional ignorance ruled the day but if they were forced to see it, they would feel compelled to act. The balancing act to keep things in step became annoying after the first Tol'An attack.

Dulain wondered how long the events of the universe would leave them to their planning and the answer came when the Pahxin sent their own intelligence officers to Earth. They arrived under the guise of helping to contain the growing terrorist threat but that unto itself became suspicious.

If they really wanted to help, they could've just sent information. Dulain considered this notion as he sat in a conference room, waiting for the two agents to arrive. *They didn't have to show up here. That tells me they're interested in spying on us, on discovering our secrets and potentially, getting their Orb back*.

There was no question among the highest echelons of authority in regards to the Orb the Gnosis took from the Tol'An. It had been stolen from the Pahxin research facility, as surely as theirs would've been taken from Gamma Alpha had the terrorists not underestimated human military capabilities.

Possession proved to be nine-tenths of the law though and as humanity began to cooperate, the lines between their relationship would start to blur. Eventually, the Orb would likely return home but until they solved a lot of problems, Earth intended to keep both of them right beside each other.

Dulain had been pushing for the higher ups to allow him to test a theory, to put the Orbs onboard the Gnosis and send it into hyperspace again. Cassandra Alexander had had a psychic episode when they were bringing the second one home and he was convinced they'd be able to do so again.

All the scientists believed that the race who built the Orbs interfaced with them through some kind of mental connection. The only way the human researchers managed to do the same thing was while flying through hyperspace. Since they could not simulate that environment, they needed to try it directly and for a sufficient amount of time to matter.

But no one wanted to risk an Orb by putting it on a spaceship, let alone both of the devices. Dulain figured they'd come around eventually but until then, he was forced to either watch them flounder or push harder with his influence. Neither felt right and he'd been biding his time.

Perhaps I waited too long. The thought came to him as he considered the agents about to enter the room. They were there for a reason and he believed it was because humanity had yet to solve the problem. *Maybe we really do need the help. If we're going to solve this thing, I can't stand on something as flimsy and stupid as pride*.

There was a point of contention there, a sense that he had failed. Dulain found it annoying because everyone on each team was doing fantastic. The Gnosis vastly exceeded its original purpose and the crew proved to be stunning. Yes, they'd experienced some loss but

considering the odds and what they fought against, it was a shock they hadn't suffered worse.

The door opened, a human guard allowing the two Pahxin representatives to enter. They were wearing identical uniforms, white fitted jackets with gray slacks and matching shoes. The male looked older, with lines on his pale features and graying hair. His blue eyes looked tired but his posture remained ramrod perfect.

The woman might've been forty, though she had a timeless quality to her. Dark red hair was carefully arranged in a neat bun and her green eyes were a little too jade in color to be natural on Earth. She wore a severe expression that made her look like she'd been doing her job for a long time.

Dulain stood. "Welcome to Earth," he said, "if you haven't been already. I'm Beaumont Dulain of the Applied Intelligence Association."

"Hello," the male spoke first. His command of English surprised Dulain. He only carried a slight accent. *They're quick studies*. "My name is Kelda Pelen and this is my associate Tierna Mauch. We have come with new information which must be considered by our two nations. I'm afraid it would be considered bad news."

"Have a seat." Dulain gestured to the other chairs. "And don't worry, I'm accustomed to hearing terrible things. It comes with the job. I'm sure you can both relate. So what're we talking about? The Tol'An? The Kalrawv Group? Someone new? I don't have a compiled dossier on every threat in the universe quite yet."

"We can share a great deal of information then," Tierna said. Her accent was a little thicker. Kelda came at this from a point of pride. He didn't want to seem weak because he didn't understand an inferior language. Somehow, they must've been mind-dumping to be so good at it. They hadn't known about humanity for *that* long. "But we are here to talk about the Tol'An."

Kelda looked grim. "They are desperate to get their hands on the remaining … Orbs as you call them. We have to combine our efforts to stop them, to discover the locations. Though this can be tricky. There are six total devices and we know where four are. You have two here and the Tol'An hold two. The final remaining, are totally unaccounted

for."
"We need a method to find them," Tierna said. "The Tol'An have mobilized their forces and are scouring parts of the galaxy but that is far too much space to cover. We are hoping for a more elegant solution."
Dulain grinned. "I might just have you covered there. Our scientists discovered a connection to the Orbs, a mental interface option. This happened while in hyperspace as we returned the stolen object to Earth. I've been pushing to attempt an experiment, to see if we can replicate the results, but I've so far been denied."
"Why?" Kelda asked.
"Too risky and no clearly defined goal." Dulain shrugged. "But if we can suggest that the Orbs are connected, that we might be able to discover the locations of those devices, then I say we'd have a good reason to put them on a ship and send them hurtling out into space. Of course, we'd want them to head to a safe location …"
"I'm not sure our home world would be a wise choice at this point," Tierna said. "Security is a concern. It would be better to arrive in an out of the way location, somewhere we can control the area completely. I'd recommend we send a ship or even a small fleet to that space so they can secure and hold it until the arrival of the Orbs."
Dulain nodded. "I like it. Now we just have to convince our superiors, both our side and yours. How hard do you think it's going to be?"
"Not difficult at all," Kelda replied. "If they do not let us take care of this, then we run the risk of the Tol'An finding the other Orbs. With four of them, they will be in a good position to come here and steal what you have. Depending on what they've been doing with the knowledge they've picked up, we may find ourselves outmatched."
"They're really that powerful?" Dulain shook his head. "I don't know. We've had ours for a while and yeah, we've managed to create some wonders but everything we did required resources … a lot of resources. We were hampered by our ability to gather enough. It wasn't until we met you guys that we were in a good place in that regard."
"Once you spread beyond your borders," Tierna replied, "you will

have access to limitless opportunities. Much of the universe remains untouched by anyone. Those sparsely charted areas are home to everything an enterprising group needs to build an armada and outfit it with state of the art weapons."
"And the Tol'An know it," Kelda added. "That's how they've been so successful. Never mind the fact they were educated by our people and taught everything they need to know to build a real revolution."
"Don't feel bad, we've done the same thing to ourselves plenty of times." Dulain sighed. "Tell me something, do you know if these things can be used as a powerful energy source? Are they able to be weaponized?"
Kelda nodded. "Absolutely. If they chose to sacrifice one, they could likely devastate a continent on your planet. It would be uninhabitable for generations, too. But the good news is that the Tol'An do not want to destroy us. They want to rule. They believe their doctrines are the *proper* way to live."
"They also want us to prepare for the eventual arrival of the progenitor race … or something like it." Tierna rolled her eyes.
"We've intercepted reports that suggest they're under the impression the original creators of the Orbs, or their destructors, will return and cause extreme damage to us."
"We've seen some evidence of their work," Dulain said. "I'm sure we sent it to you?"
"Yes, we witnessed the dead planets." Kelda scowled. "Technology run amok. Some of these old civilizations became absolutely obsessed with their own creativity. We've found the ruins of many such places, all lost to the sands of time. None of them learned the greatest lesson, that of temperance."
Tierna added, "Even the Tol'An are guilty of this. They grasp at technology they do not understand, seeking artifacts and other items which are too dangerous for any group to hold onto. For example, we confiscated a destructive device, a bomb you'd call it. We'd never seen such technology before and upon further investigation, it could've destroyed a moon."
"Not damaged it," Kelda said. "Destroyed it. Total, complete

obliteration. Imagine what that would do to a culture … to an entire world. Such disregard for the sanctity of a planet makes us leery of what we're dealing with and how far they will go. We had hoped to rehabilitate the Tol'An supporters but it is becoming obvious we do not have that option."

"Zealots aren't good about changing," Dulain replied. "Okay, so we've got our objectives. Find the loose Orbs, discover the two that the Tol'An are holding and take them down. I know I'm simplifying, but that's about it, right? We don't have a fourth problem that I'm unaware of?"

"There are neutral factions that may become problems," Tierna said. "We are negotiating with some of them to remain out of the fight or to help even. The Gaelirans in particular are interested in helping. They are not pleased by the attack on their neutral station. Though they aren't committing to military action, they are willing to donate resources."

"That's a start." Dulain considered what they might be able to offer. His briefing suggested the neutral group had worked on a wide variety of interesting technology. Perhaps they could help locate the Tol'An base. That would be a huge help. "I'm glad to hear we're compiling allies."

"We have been busy," Kelda replied. "We have a meeting later which I believe we should prepare for. I would like to work out the specifics so we can pitch your idea and lend the full support of our government to it. I believe our two divisions can learn much from one another, provide support. Let us work together to fix this problem once and for all."

Dulain smiled. He went into the meeting without a clue of what it was about. That always annoyed him but this time, it worked out wonderfully. A better outcome couldn't have been predicted regardless. These were the allies he needed to get the job done. Pursing his lips, he cleared his throat. "I can't wait."

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Chapter 1

Captain Desmond Bradford sat on the bridge, leaning back as the Gnosis entered its final approach to Earth. The ship held up well considering all the required repairs they went through on their last assignment. Engineering really went above and beyond, especially considering the circumstances.

He was willing to bet that everyone on board held their breath before they went into hyperspace. After fully charging the generators and breaking atmosphere, they were thrilled to note that all the seals held. They safely made it into orbit and beyond. Technicians from the Pahxin vessel Stalwart returned home and together, both ships plotted a course for Earth.

When they didn't explode upon entering hyperspace, Desmond allowed himself to relax and even took some down time. He slept for a good seven hours before returning to duty. Though he received a reasonable briefing from the away team while the repairs were underway, it wasn't until after they got some rest that he got a real rundown from Commander Vincent Bowman.

He explained the one personnel loss in Sergeant Lawrence Gorman and discussed the species which had essentially copied their consciousness into a complicated machine. It allowed them to interface with their technology, including a ship some distance away but they had a range. They could not leave their home so they took sport on those who visited them.

Gorman destroyed the device, likely the thing that the Tol'An happened to be there for. Desmond couldn't see how the terrorists intended to use such a thing. It wasn't exactly a weapon and had they received it, they may well have endured the same curse that the builders did. Such a thing didn't seem tactically sound.

Though maybe if used in moderation, they would never have to risk actual personnel to conduct combat operations. Desmond considered the use case and couldn't deny the benefits. *They could keep backups on a different device, ensuring they never actually lost their best people. Okay,*

so it could've been pretty dangerous.
Though, the Tol'An engineers would've had to break the thing down to figure any of that out and he didn't think they were capable of it. Not quickly at least and certainly not in a time frame that would've made any difference to their conflict with the Pahxin and humans. Frankly speaking, they probably would've unleashed hell on the universe by freeing those things.
This is the danger of hunting for ancient relics.
Vincent joined him, rubbing his eyes. The loss of Gorman weighed on him and Desmond had ordered him to take some extra time off. As the commander sat down, it was clear he'd returned to some semblance of his normal self. He went about reading his reports, checking in with various departments.
"You okay?" Desmond asked.
"Yes, sir. Thanks." Vincent chewed his lip for a moment. "I know it wasn't my fault. The sergeant … He was hurt already. I don't think he would've made it out of there even if he hadn't … made the choice he did."
"It's hard to admit stuff like that," Desmond said, "but essential. You need to remember it though. Don't pay it lip service. Talk to one of the doctors if you need to but if for a moment, you start feeling particularly guilty, you have to get some help. Believe me, I know from personal experience."
"I get it." Vincent nodded. "Believe me, I won't lose myself in this. It's not my first time losing someone but in the fact I looked him in the eye before he made the call? That was new. Then, I just had to get everyone else back safely. There was no time for regret or worry in the moment. Just action."
They'd been through the conversation before but Desmond found a little reinforcement never hurt. He let the topic drop and went back to his own duties just as their pilot, Lieutenant Commander Zach Caplan, cleared his throat. "We are dropping out of hyperspace in less than a minute."
This was the second portion of their trip that Desmond dreaded. Leaving hyperspace with their damage carried a risk. It *should* hold

together but he'd read some of the theories about what might happen to a vessel after combat. The Pahxin provided more examples, which he didn't particularly *want* to read, despite their usefulness.

Where the human data came from theory and conjecture, the Pahxin documents showed actual trials where ships were torn apart. They sent unmanned crafts through hyperspace to test their theories, capturing the various ways they were destroyed as a result of a bad seal or inconsistent energy output.

Desmond wished he hadn't read through them prior to their last mission. Ignorance, in this case, would've been far more comfortable. He could imagine the PR nightmare of their arriving home only to explode instantly. With the Stalwart close behind them, perhaps already there, he figured they'd take the blame somehow.

We always have to leverage blame about things. The random thought distracted him from Zach's countdown but not enough to make him drop the philosophical rhetoric in the last couple of seconds. He held his breath at two and one. A tremor ran through the hull, vibrating the floor and walls.

"We have left hyperspace," Zach announced.

Lieutenant Salina Gold spoke up. "All systems are reporting normal. No damage to any systems and all computers remain online."

"My compliments to engineering," Desmond said. He worked hard not to sound too relieved. "Open a channel to Earth and get me Admiral Reach. I'd like to get a briefing on his calendar as soon as possible. Has the Stalwart arrived?"

"Yes, sir." Salina paused a moment. "They have already achieved orbit with Earth. I suppose they must've beaten us here."

"Of course they did," Desmond muttered. "I'll take those coms in my office. Zach, get us underway and achieve orbit as soon as you can. Vincent, you've got the bridge. Get a full diagnostic and find out what we have to fix now that we've got the right tools at home. I'm assuming we'll be back out there soon, so we'd better make it snappy."

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Reach agreed to meet for a debriefing, but he had something far more urgent to discuss. He told Desmond a story about the Tol'An's ambition and how there were six total Orbs somewhere in the galaxy. A collaborative effort between the Pahxin and Earth came to a unanimous decision about prioritizing the collection of the devices.
"But how are we supposed to find them?" Desmond asked. "We knew where the second one was because of the Tol'An's records."
"The AIA and Pahxin intelligence have come up with an idea and they seriously believe it'll work. Remember when Agent Alexander had her little vision with the Orb?"
Desmond did remember. When they were on their way back home with their prize, she had had a waking dream, seeing a catastrophe on some other planet. The theory came out that the Orbs likely interfaced with organic minds in that way, allowing users to draw data straight from them. Harper wanted to test the theory, but they couldn't get it to happen again.
"Yes," Desmond replied. "Why?"
"They believe we can make it happen again if we recreate the conditions she found herself in during that time. On board the Gnosis, while in hyperspace. Some combination of factors there may well cut it and get us the data we need. That means you'll be fitted with the Orbs and sent to a place far enough away to give our scientists time to try a few things."
"That sounds like a security nightmare," Desmond said. "Having them both aboard? And where are we going to go that fits that bill?"
"The Pahxin have made some suggestions that we're checking out to ensure they're the right call. I'm aware of some damage that we need to repair on the Gnosis and there are some administrative issues that need to be addressed. However, I intend to get you moving as soon as possible. I can't emphasize enough how urgent this is."
"What happens when all of them are brought together?" Desmond asked. "What sort of catastrophe are we preventing? Or worse … what are we risking by trying to bring them together ourselves?"
Reach sighed. "That's a good question, one that everyone's been debating since the intelligence briefing we experienced not too long

ago. Some think the Tol'An would use them as bombs, essentially destroying their enemies utterly. Others think there's some sort of super technology that can be unleashed when they're all together."
"What's your opinion?"
"That they're a bunch of data receptacles that can be used for good or ill, depending on the integrity of the wielders. Sure, we know they have a lot of energy pent up in them but does that mean they'll be used to destroy worlds? Why would someone waste these resources like that? Even the zealots. And they could do that today with what they have."
"Fair point." Desmond pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay. So when we get back, we repair, resupply then head out with the Orbs. Correct?"
"That's the plan."
"I hate to ask this question considering what the Stalwart has done for us but … do we trust the Pahxin?"
"The council does," Reach replied. He paused for a long moment. "Do you have reason not to?"
"The mercenaries we ran into out there were Pahxin," Desmond said. "The Tol'An too. But to be fair, before we met them, all our enemies were human. I guess my point is that we should be cautious about how many of them are allowed on the ship. It would be easier for our enemies to infiltrate them than us."
"Yes, the AIA and Pahxin intelligence will be vetting all new personnel who are allowed on board." Reach cleared his throat. "Anyway, I see you're roughly four hours out of orbit. When you get here, we'll speak in person. Until then, brief your top people on what's happening and let them know the score. It'll save time for when you arrive."
"Will do." Desmond's finger hovered over the button to close the connection. "Admiral, I'm afraid this might require a real conflict to settle … an actual war. Unless I'm totally in the dark, I'm not sure we're in any position to field a force to participate in such an action. Am I wrong?"
"Not entirely," Reach said. "Our next ship is nearly complete. We're still shaking the bugs out and testing it. I'm not sure exactly when it

will be ready but that will at least be two highly advanced vessels on our side."
"Better than nothing," Desmond replied. "Thank you, sir. Please let me know if anything comes up before we arrive. Bradford out." He flopped back in his chair and closed his eyes. Part of him had hoped they'd have a chance to get some downtime. The mission on the previous planet had left most of the crew exhausted.
They wouldn't get the couple weeks they needed but even a couple days would be nice. Most of the personnel didn't have to be involved in the repairs so that was one positive side of things. Even worse was the responsibility that would be leveraged on the ship. The sheer amount of security would be insane.
Mostly new people that we don't know if we can trust. Desmond put a meeting on the calendars of all his top people and headed out to setup the briefing room. He tried to think of a good way to spin the mission but in the end, he decided to keep things very real and direct. They could draw their own conclusions about what they were about to face.

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Cassie Alexander left the briefing with her head bowed, thoughtful about their new mission. When the Orb touched her mind, she had had a hard time shaking the vision and it ended up invaluable when they went back out. Their discovery gave them key information about the fate of several dead civilizations, a potential future for their own if they weren't mindful.
I know for a fact that Dulain is going to ask me to try this again. He'll want everything to be exactly the same as the first time it happened. Cassie didn't bring up her concern in the briefing, but she knew Vincent noticed. He'd definitely be tracking her down soon to discuss it and she had to decide if she wanted to talk about her fears.
Before she discussed anything, she really wanted to speak to Dulain in person. He might want to put a ridiculous restriction on what she could say. Of course, as a senior agent, Cassie enjoyed latitude in her position. She hadn't exercised them much but if Vincent pressed, she

might fall back on them.
Desmond made it clear his biggest concern was security. They would be discussing *where* the Gnosis would be going after they arrived on Earth but before then, they needed to figure out the best way to lockdown engineering and ensure only authorized personnel even got on the floor.
That meant moving some other minor departments, a couple tech and science labs, to a different deck. Once they did that, they'd have storage and maintenance tunnels. Both of which would be swept by the marines prior to departure. AIA resources would be coming aboard to double check their efforts as well.
This earned Cassie a dirty look from everyone at the table, as if she had made the decision herself. Few people trusted her division and having worked among them, she understood why. The AIA played everything close to the chest, which didn't foster a good team environment.
"Hey!" Vincent called out as Cassie walked down the hall and she slowed to allow him to catch up. "You were out of there like a shot. What's up?"
"The captain's right about the security nightmare," Cassie replied. "I'm more worried about getting them on board than keeping them here. There are Earth factions that would love to steal those. I hope the AIA's up to the task."
Vincent grinned. "You don't have faith in your own folks?"
"I didn't mean that." Cassie sighed. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be short. When the captain mentioned my vision, I understood what people were going to ask of me. My superior's been talking about this for a while. He'll want me to try to do it again."
"Is that a problem?" Vincent asked.
"It scares me." Cassie shrugged. "Interfacing with an alien technology we barely understand? Letting it touch my mind? That's not something you line up for at the county fair. And while I'm all for trying it again eventually, I was really hoping we'd get some more study time in. This is a crash course."
"Hm." Vincent furrowed his brow, falling silent for a few moments.

“Maybe there’s something we can do. I can attempt to push them toward making you a project lead. You won’t have to participate in the experiment at all. And we can use our last mission as a good excuse too. It’s not like we walked away from that totally unscathed.”
“I appreciate the gesture,” Cassie replied, “but that’s not the answer either. I can’t allow someone else to do it. At least I’ve been through it once, but someone else? Yeah, I’m scared but I’m also not selfish enough to back away when they’ll just make someone else step up. Not to mention the fact that I might be jumping the gun.”
“How do you mean?”
“Honestly, we’re just assuming I’ll be the one to do this. Dulain is crafty. He might have another plan.” Cassie shook her head and continued down the hall. “I need to wait to hear the plan and not let dread bother me. Besides, we’ve been through some pretty stressful situations. How bad can this *really* be?”
“I guess that’s turning a frown upside down.” Vincent gently touched her arm. “Hey, do you want to get lunch? We can try to forget about this for an hour and just enjoy a quiet meal. Duty will absolutely be waiting for us at the door and probably demand a tip but until then, we could forget about it all.”
Cassie smiled. Her first inclination was to turn him down, mostly so she could go worry somewhere alone. That didn’t seem to be the answer and he looked terribly earnest. More to the point, he very likely could distract her and that sounded pretty amazing just then.
“Okay, let’s do it.”
“Excellent. I know this fantastic restaurant where the chef is mildly disgruntled but they’re required to give us a deal on the food.”
Vincent smiled as they walked. “You’ll love it. I’ll even let you pay.”
“Really?” Cassie widened her eyes, giving him a shocked expression. “What generosity! I don’t even know how you do it, Vincent.” She sighed. “Are we allowed to be silly right now? Considering what we’re doing?”
“I figure if we can’t take a moment to remember who we are, there’s no reason to keep fighting. No reason to perform our duties or fight these battles.” Vincent looked her in the eyes. “If we can’t have friends

and be humans, then what's the point of heading to the stars? No, people say we're out here to discover new things, but I'd beg to differ."
"Yeah? What do you think we're doing then?"
"Think back to the Greek heroes. They were sailing to find themselves, to learn what they were capable of. Adventure pushed them to become greater. We seek adversity to challenge our skills, to see what we can handle. Failure, while possible, is not a deterrent. We're doing this to become better."
"That's very philosophical, commander. I'm impressed."
"If you liked that, wait till you hear my theory concerning fighter pilots." Vincent chuckled. "I promise, you'll never be the same."
"That's already true." Cassie let herself relax in his presence and hoped for a decent, quiet hour. They might not see many more in the near future. It was a good idea to grab what they could.

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Captain Darren Gabriel personified the concept of a stern, unyielding marine. He'd been in the corps for more than ten years and ran a number of ops in multiple capacities. His commission didn't come until after he'd been in the service for three years. A little higher education and focus got him into the ranks of officers.
Admiral Reach hand picked him to board the Gnosis in charge of security and marine operations. He, like many others, thought it would be a milk run. They were going to dead planets in the middle of nowhere. What sort of conflict could there possibly be? His initial assessment was his men would be military police, maintaining shipside order.
Their first operations proved otherwise, and he'd lost good men to the cause already. Each mission felt like a wartime effort, something to be concerned about as they plunged into more of the unknown. This time, casualties claimed some lives and severely injured some excellent troopers. Darren spent a lot of time in the medical bay, sticking close to them.

Security for the Orbs became his number one priority, but he took a break from planning how best to lock the ship down to visit Lieutenant Brent Fielding, the field officer who protected the ship while it was downed. He was shot in the shoulder and nearly lost the arm. Modern medicine saved it, but he'd be out of action for a while. Fielding started acting more alert after they emerged from hyperspace, but he still acted drowsy. His spirits remained up and he committed to getting back into action as soon as possible. Darren wanted to speak to Doctor Jason Holland about whether or not they should send the young lieutenant home to recover on Earth.

He stopped by Fielding's bed and gripped his good hand. Blue eyes fluttered open and he nodded at Darren. "Hi, sir."

"Just checking in on you, son. How're you feeling?"

"I think I've been shot." Fielding smiled. "It's numb. Whatever they're giving me works wonders. I've been able to sleep without any problem."

"Good. I'm going to talk to the doctor about you here in a moment. We'll probably come back to give you some options soon." Darren looked at the thick bandages around Fielding's shoulder and had to fight not to wince. "You think you can stay awake for a few more minutes?"

"No problem." Fielding spoke slowly. "I think …"

"Well, we'll wake you up if we have to." Darren patted his hand. "Stay tough, soldier." He moved over to Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow, who also received an injury during his assignment. The other men called him Heat. He'd received an energy blast to the leg and while it would immobilize him for a time, he'd make a full recovery. "How're you, Gunny?"

"I'm alright, sir," Heat replied. He stared into space, at attention even in his bed. Darren knew the man was in mourning for a good friend, Sergeant Lawrence Gorman, who sacrificed himself to save the rest of them. "I haven't heard how long I'm going to be stuck in this bed though, sir. How can I find out?"

"I'm about to talk to the doctor about Fielding," Darren replied. "I'll ask about you. Maybe you can go back to some private quarters to

relax there. If that's what you'd prefer I mean."
"Yes, sir, I think I would, sir."
"You don't have to be so formal with a hole in your leg, son." Darren patted his shoulder. "Believe me, when you take a bullet in my company, you've earned the right to be casual for a while."
"Thank you … I'll keep that in mind." Heat cleared his throat. "Are we having a service for Sergeant Gorman?"
"Yes, we will. All of them."
"I would very much like to attend. I'll walk there myself if I have to but please make sure I'm able to be there."
"You will not miss it," Darren replied. "I give you my word. Now … rest up. I'll keep you informed about how long you have to stay here and when we'll be able to put something together for our fallen brothers. Thank you again. For everything you did, Gunny. It's been impressive work out of you."
"Just doing my job, sir."
"And a little bit more, I believe." Darren stepped away and found the doctor in his office. He knocked twice before entering and closing the door behind him. "Hello, Doctor Holland. Do you have a moment to discuss my men?"
"Have a seat." Holland gestured to the chair across from him. "They're both in a pretty bad way with Lieutenant Fielding in the worst of it. Obviously, neither one is in jeopardy of dying at this point but I'm not sure how much mobility Fielding will have with that arm. He practically lost it … In fact, we debated removing it at one point."
"Christ, that's worse than I thought." Darren rubbed his eyes. "How long do you think it'll be before he can start some physical therapy?"
"We'll be referencing data from the Orb when we return to Earth. It might have some ideas for speeding up the healing and even helping the joint damage but right now, we're looking at a minimum of six weeks."
"Jesus. That's a long time. So you'd think we should move him back to Earth to recover then?"
"Yes, undoubtedly. He'd just be taking up space here and considering what we've been dealing with, I'd say we need the room." Jason

frowned. “I’m sure that sounded morbid, and I didn’t mean it to but really, he doesn’t need the stress of additional injuries coming in.”
“I understand.” Darren leaned forward. “What about Heathrow? How’s that leg?”
“He’s going to be fine,” Jason said. “The wound could’ve been a lot worse. We got to him fast enough to ensure a quick recovery. He won’t be out in the field for a bit, but I could return him to light duty soon. Maybe he can operate as base support? I don’t know how you guys handle that kind of thing.”
“That’s a good call.” Darren stood. “I’m going to give them the news. I appreciate everything you’ve done, Doctor. Fielding in particular owes you his life, I’m sure. Thank you.”
“Of course.” Jason shook his hand. “I’ll get the lieutenant’s records down to Gamma Alpha right away. They’ll be able to pick up his treatment and hopefully figure something out with that arm.”
Darren headed out, considering the two men. If Heat was in light duty in the next day or so, he’d be able to help with the security detail. Fielding would need to be transported as soon as they achieved orbit. That meant getting a new lieutenant until he could return or promoting from within.
Considering the roster, Heat was the closest in rank. They’d have to go back to the pool and perform more interviews. Having lost two lieutenants, they might have a hard time finding volunteers that were worth a damn. *Better to give Fielding a chance to recover and move on from there.*

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Chapter 2

Dulain contacted Cassie the moment her shuttle landed. He asked her to come to his makeshift office right away. Christina Dawson would also attend their gathering. After revealing her affiliation to Admiral Reach, she opened them up to a partnership that the AIA wasn't really interested in but had to adhere to.

Luckily, she managed to gather actionable intel, which helped everyone enough to forgive the breach. Saving Reach's life gave him good cause to keep their involvement in his retinue a secret, but he demanded some more interaction. Dulain had a meeting scheduled with him in a few hours.

Christina arrived first, dressed in civilian clothes. Black tee shirt, blue jeans and a pair of black boots didn't exactly make her look casual but since he hadn't seen her out of her military uniform in months, it was quite the contrast. She approached his desk, hands on her hips as she gave him a disapproving glare.

"Was there something?" Dulain asked. "If so, you should get it over with quickly. Agent Alexander will be here soon."

"You're sending me with the Gnosis," Christina said. "Why?"

"Because I need some security on the ship I can trust." Dulain shrugged. "Why do you think I'm sending you? We're putting our most valuable objects up there and between here and there, God knows what could happen. Your little rescue of the ambassador and admiral gave me all the clout I needed to get you in."

"Dulain, my assignment is the admiral."

"Actually, I give you the jobs," Dulain replied. "So that means whatever I say you need to do, you do. Besides, Reach knows about us now so he's not going to reveal any secrets in your presence anymore. You saved his life but he's a shrewd politician and the whole military thing of 'owing' people for saving them won't apply here."

"I was working that asset."

"You did. And we got a lot of actionable info but the ship's sailed now." Dulain shook his head and looked down at his computer. "I

need your skills on that ship."
"And what about Alexander? What the hell is she going to be doing?"
"Making contact with the Orb is my hope. She did it before and that means there's some kind of compatibility there. I'd say she's definitely one of our best chances to get this done. Also, you're going to have a variety of other scientists with you and I need them all vetted so get our top people on it."
"Oh, thanks." Christina rolled her eyes. "We don't have time to do all of this properly."
"You have to do the best you can." Dulain gestured to one of the chairs. "Have a seat so that she doesn't think we're arguing when she arrives."
"Appearances are everything, huh?" Christina flopped down, still glaring. "Have you ever thought for a moment about being … I don't know … real? Do you even know what it's like to not put on a show?"
Dulain considered the question for a moment. He couldn't help but smile. She really was hot. "First off, I think your questions are out of line. I'm still your superior here. But just to entertain you, put on a show as you say, I think that everyone does it. Every day, each interaction, it's a game. The rules change based on who we're dealing with."
"Do you honestly believe that?"
"You've seen it yourself," Dulain said. "Think about how you act with the admiral. It's different than when you speak to Agent Alexander or even me. You used to be a lot more polite about how we talked but I'm chalking this up to frustration … and the stress of your previous job." He snapped his fingers. "Are you worried about efficiency after being captured?"
Christina tilted her head down. She made a fist. "Are you suggesting that I'm … what … stressed? Experiencing some kind of PTSD?"
Dulain lifted his shoulder. "I'm wondering if I should be concerned, that's all."
"No, I'm fine." Christina started to say something else but a knock at the door interrupted her. "I guess we can continue this conversation later."

“If we have to,” Dulain said. “Maybe you’ll change your mind after this meeting. I’m hopeful at least.” He tapped a button on his desk to connect to the intercom. “Come on in. It’s unlocked.”
Cassie stepped into the room, offering a curt nod to Dulain and another to Christina. “You wanted to see me.”
“It’s not that formal.” Dulain gestured to a chair. “Please, join us. We’ve got a lot to talk about and probably not as much time as we’d like to do it. Maybe we can do lunch when we’re done. I know I’m famished. Do they feed you on the shuttle trip down from the Gnosis?”
Cassie lifted a brow and shook her head slowly. “No … It’s not quite forty minutes between departure and landing.”
“Oh, that fast?” Dulain felt impressed. “Interesting. Okay, Christina’s glaring at me so I think we need to jump into this. If you remember our earlier conversation, we need to get the Orbs up to the Gnosis to try our theory about hyperspace and connectivity. This time, we’re sending a cadre of scientists to help.”
“I received a briefing on the ship,” Cassie said. “Everyone’s worried about security from Gamma Alpha to the ship. And after we leave as well.”
“Yes, I know, I’ve raised several of these concerns as well.” Dulain smiled. “Fortunately, Christina has already started vetting the new personnel that will make their way up to the ship. She should have them ready to go in the next couple of days, right?”
Christina looked like she might lash out across the table and punch him in the face, but she just nodded instead.
“Excellent.” Dulain turned back to Cassie. “So as I’m sure you realize, I want you to attempt to do whatever you did before. You’ll want to recreate the experiment as accurately as possible. I’ve sent you the report you gave me before to refresh your memory. Let me know if you need anything else before you leave.”
“Have we considered how dangerous this might be?” Cassie asked.
“What do you mean?” Dulain shrugged. “How so?”
“Whoever this ends up working on is going to be intentionally interfacing with an alien artifact that we only barely understand the operation of.” Cassie pursed her lips before continuing, clearly

fighting to master her concerns. “What if this goes badly? What happens then? Are we prepared for the ramifications?”
“Anyone this might have an impact on understands the risk.” Dulain tilted his head. “Unless you’re saying otherwise. I mean, you do know that we’re embarking into the unknown, right? This is serious science. The kind where discoveries are made. Society-altering finds. Yeah, it’s risky but ultimately, who cares? We’re pushing the envelope here.”
“So we’re okay with someone getting hurt?” Christina asked. “Even dying?”
“Considering the alternative?” Dulain sighed. “Okay, I didn’t want to get grave on you both, but let’s talk about why we’re doing this. The Tol’An are trying to acquire the rest of the Orbs. We have to find them first. If we don’t, they will likely destroy the Pahxin people. From there, who do you think they’re coming for?”
The woman remained quiet.
“Exactly. And think about this: they don’t seem to be interested in killing us all. They’ve got doctrines they’re intending to force on other sentient life. There are groups out there that should be our allies and they aren’t because of profit margins and payouts. The mercenaries, this Kalrawv Group … God knows who else … They don’t care, even if they should.”
Cassie nodded. “Understood.”
“Thank you.” Dulain adjusted his collar before continuing. “Anyway, I would like you to work together on the security details. Cassie can coordinate with the Gnosis this way. She’s got the direct relationship with Captain Bradford. Don’t forget to look at the layout of the vessel and plan for necessary lockdowns.”
Cassie added, “We’ve already cleared the deck where the Orbs will be. All labs are moved and so only authorized personnel will be allowed to visit. We need to make sure everyone who will be involved gets marked somehow. A badge, or better yet, sub-dermal chipping. That would be ideal.”
“I like it.” Dulain gestured to Christina. “Don’t we have those biodegradable ones? They dissolve in like … three days or something?”

“It’s more like a week,” Christina said, “and when they do, they exit through the urine. It’s not exactly pleasant because not all the parts break down but in this case, I’m sure we don’t have to worry about that. This is a little more important than a couple bathroom visits that cause the victim to writhe.”
“Gross,” Dulain replied, “but totally agree. Okay. Take these great ideas together, go get some food and work it out. I’m sure you’ll bring back a report of greatness. Email me. I’ve got to go see Admiral Reach and the Pahxin folks again. They’ll want to know we’re all over this situation and know how we’re going to go about the whole task.”
“Do we have the coordinates for the hyperspace jump?” Cassie asked.
“Yes,” Dulain said. “But I’m afraid it’s not being revealed until the last possible minute. You know how it is. We have to be careful with that kind of thing. The Stalwart and a couple other ships will be meeting you out there so it won’t be entirely dangerous but we don’t need them to have a brawl while they wait for you.”
“When are they leaving?” Christina asked.
“Just before you guys.” Dulain stood. “Okay, shoo. Go make your plans. I’ve got places to be. Thank you both for your service and everything you do. I have the utmost confidence in this mission. Good luck!” He watched them go, wondering how much they would complain about him if there was someone who would listen.
They’re efficient and will get the job done. They don’t have to like me.
Dulain steeled himself for the meeting with Reach and the rest of the afternoon. So many small details remained to go through, he figured they’d be talking for the rest of the day. Mostly, they’d talk about what their various team were doing to ensure the success of the mission.
The military will take the public point, the Pahxin will be the advisors and we will do the real work. That sounds about normal to me. Dulain looked at himself in the mirror and straightened his hair before heading out. *I hope there’s food at this thing. A bite to eat will make the high-level pontification all that much easier to swallow. So to speak*.

***

Desmond and Vincent oversaw the efforts to secure the Gnosis. Darren's marines kept firm control of the engineering deck. They elevated the credentials required for access through the elevators, and guards were prepared to be present for transitioning the Orbs to their temporary home.

Heat recovered enough to help with coordination though it was clear he wished he could've been up and about. He had the skill but not the temperament. Desmond hoped for his sake his leg would heal up soon so he could go about his normal tasks. If the man wasn't being shot at, he didn't seem happy.

Cassie brought Christina Dawson aboard with two AIA representatives the next day. They had a private meeting discussing their plan for all vetted staff to receive the scanning chips which would allow them to use the elevators to get to the Orbs. Desmond figured they were holding things back, but he didn't push.

The AIA liked their secrets too much to give them up and pressing just led to lies. They claimed they were going through all the people who would gain access to the ship and there would be dossiers delivered before they left the planet. Furthermore, the shuttles were already chosen and the Orbs prepared to move.

Desmond attended a meeting where some of the council suggested having the Gnosis land near Gamma Alpha but that was vetoed as too conspicuous. There were factions on Earth which were still a threat to peace, groups that would love to cause trouble. Especially after the announcement of the Pahxin arrangement.

The reaction of humanity to the announcement had been mixed but leaned toward optimism. Government officials and the AIA worked hard to paint it in a positive light and they hit a home run in that regard. Desmond colored himself shocked by the news. Sure, there were plenty of conspiracy theorists trying to cause trouble but they were in the vast minority.

Many were hopeful. In fact, several groups cited the positive relationship with the Pahxin as what they were hoping would happen when humanity took to the stars. And as they began to collaborate, it

felt like people were evolving with their new position in a wider, far more expansive universe than they thought possible before.

Repairs happened quickly with assistance. The hull was secure and all internal systems were returned to full health. They still didn't have the coordinates for where they were going but Cassie promised they'd receive them with plenty of time to do a quick check for safety protocols.

Less than a week after they returned to Earth, Desmond found himself standing with Darren in the hangar bay waiting for the shuttle to depart. Tension filled the ship so thick it could be cut with little more than a finger. Marines stood in position, ready in their roles as they occupied the path from docking to the Orb housing arrangement.

"Here we go," Darren said. "They're going to be loading them up soon and then we can wait just about an hour before they arrive."

"I think everyone's ready," Desmond replied. "Even if they weren't, we don't have a lot of choice, huh? We'll need to get them settled and establish our course."

"How many AIA can we expect on this cruise?"

"Just two that I'm aware of." Desmond checked his tablet to see if things were underway at Gamma Alpha yet, but the Orbs hadn't left the building. "And we're used to one of them. The other traveled with us on that ambassadorial mission."

"I know Dawson," Darren said. "I tried to look into her before she came on board. Her record was a bit wonky. I had a feeling she might've been a plant, but I couldn't prove it."

"What pushed you in that direction?"

Darren smirked. "Some of the accolades were a bit farfetched. Mostly because they tried to keep them innocuous. But it didn't work. I knew about the actions she was supposedly involved with. Hell, I was involved in some of them and I can't remember seeing her there. Considering what she looks like, I figured I would've."

"People change," Desmond teased. "But no, I understand. The papers have to pass a moderate amount of scrutiny. They don't worry about eye witnesses usually because the chances of encountering them are probably slim. Especially with the duty she was fulfilling. Following

around the admiral didn't *require* ground combat."
"True enough. I'm just surprised his people didn't figure it out."
"They probably didn't even know what to look for." Desmond looked around the room. "You sure you vetted all the new marines coming on board?"
"Yes, and I worked with my former CO to ensure he only sent people we both trusted. So we're good there." Darren scratched the back of his head. "Or at least as good as we can be. Let's not forget that nothing is completely foolproof."
"We only have to worry about saboteurs, spies, zealots and insane people," Desmond said. "What could possibly go wrong? And how does that challenge our security techniques?" He chuckled at Darren's severe expression. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to make light of our situation but honestly, if we freak out too much, we'll go crazy with paranoia."
"Yeah, and that's what we pay the AIA for," Darren said. "To be paranoid for us."
"Amen to that." Desmond checked his tablet again. "They're moving the Orbs now. I hope we're ready, Darren. It's go time."

***

Cassie had visited Gamma Alpha more times than she could count during her career with the AIA. She'd never seen so many soldiers and guns at the ready. Marines manned the turrets and fighters flew air coverage. Everyone wore body armor, including her, and they were required to carry submachine guns.
Christina stepped out, pausing beside Cassie. "They're on the move now."
"It looks like we're pretty good," Cassie replied. "It would take a small army to cause us any real trouble now."
"Anyone who wants these things can field a sizable force, believe me." Christina paused, pressing her fingers against her ear. "They're almost out. Can you feel the tension yet?"
Cassie chuckled. "I've felt the tension since we agreed to this plan.

Where's Dulain?"
"Sitting in an air-conditioned office somewhere watching our progress with a smile on his face and a glass of ice water no doubt."
The weather chose to be particularly warm that day, pushing eighty-eight degrees. The sun beamed down on the concrete and metal, making some parts steam. Many of the marines wore their power armor, which was environmentally controlled but those who could not, people like Cassie and Christina, were being baked inside Kevlar. Jets screamed by overhead, drawing a quick look. *Just another flyby. They're running circular patrols to keep an eye on the horizon.* Scans should've picked up any incoming combatants that had the nerve to assault the base, but the assumption was anyone with the nerve to try something would have stealth capabilities.
No one on Earth knew how to overcome straight visual contact though and so a massive squadron of twenty ships were put in the air. Once the Orbs were loaded up, ten of them would escort four shuttles to the Gnosis. They decided to add some decoys to the arrangement and would switch up the one carrying the cargo at the last second.
Cassie had to admit, Christina's paranoia was impressive. She planned like the sky might fall at any moment, putting together contingencies for things that likely would never happen. Years of following the admiral around hadn't dulled her skills and she proved why Dulain picked her for the job.
Especially considering how much they quarreled with their eyes in Cassie's presence. They tried to hide their little contention from her, but it was far too obvious to ignore. Whatever existed between them, whether it was strictly professional or the result of a failed romance in the past, created tension.
This made Cassie think about Vincent. Was it a good idea to get involved with a man she worked with? Even after her assignment with the Gnosis ended, she might run into him in a working environment in the future. He was so earnest, a genuinely good person and definitely not suited to get involved in the higher levels of the AIA.
I don't even know if I'm suited for it. Cassie considered her position and the rise to Senior Agent. If she was to be totally honest, she didn't

really know what it meant. So far, she enjoyed a higher security clearance, access to better resources if she needed them and a bunch of clandestine double speak.

Dulain seemed to throw it to her as a bone, as if she needed a title to continue to do her job. Maybe whoever he reported to wanted to ensure a 'senior' person was on the project. He didn't like being told what to do so he'd just promote her. As a younger, less experienced operative, he probably thought she'd be easy to manipulate and control.

Wow, I'm becoming cynical.

"Here they come." Christina interrupted her thoughts and Cassie forced herself back into the moment. She glanced over her shoulder as the two large doors opened. They brought the Orbs out on forklifts, driving them slowly to ensure they didn't fall off, even though they were lashed down like the worst prisoners imaginable.

Christina clearly wanted them to go faster but she didn't say anything. Instead, she motioned for Cassie to follow her and they hustled over to the awaiting shuttles. When they arrived, all four ships were idling, ready to take off at a moment's notice. Technicians stood by each of them, prepared to board.

"Which ones?" Christina asked.

"What?" Cassie gave her a blank look. "What do you mean?"

"Pick. Which ones are taking the Orbs?"

"You want me to decide?"

"It'll make it more random." Christina glanced back at the Orbs. "They're almost here. Decide fast."

"Um … these two." Cassie pointed at one on the far left and one in the middle.

"Great." Christina nodded. She got on her com and told them to load them on the opposite ones that Cassie said.

"What was that?"

"The random element," Christina replied. "Don't take it personally." She gestured to some of the marines. "You men, get on the turrets in these things right now. As soon as the devices are secure, you'll be launching."

Marines boarded the shuttles just as the Orbs arrived. The technicians took the bindings off and worked to get them on board the different ships. Cassie felt a sense of sadness as theirs was loaded up. It hadn't left Earth in generations, possibly never. Part of their past was taking a trip and she hoped it would return safely.

"Our shuttle's over there," Christina said. "We should get moving—" A gun went off in the distance, a single bullet that interrupted Christina's comment. She got on the com, brow furrowed. "What the hell was that? Tell me that was an accidental discharge." There were enough people with guns standing around so the possibility was very real.

Reports spilled in over the com. No one admitted to firing their weapon. Cassie stood up straighter, scanning the area for any sign of something being out of place, someone moving where they shouldn't. The Orbs were nearly secure, and they'd be off soon but they weren't moving quickly enough for her taste.

Another gunshot went off. Christina cursed, calling the direction of the shot as east. Cassie wondered how she knew. It echoed so badly, she would've needed a scanner to gather that kind of intel. A moment passed where the coms remained relatively silent. Different sections of the base called that they were clear.

"Contact, east!" Marines shouted. Turrets turned, and they opened fire. Chaos erupted, weapons discharging in rapid fire. Cassie flinched, stepping back toward the shuttles. Christina remained in place, glaring in the direction where the most action seemed to be taking place. Marines moved into place and provided supplemental fire.

"I need air coverage," Christina spoke into her com. "Get me a visual on what's happening over there." She turned to Cassie. "If they were shooting at you, you'd already be dead. Relax until you see someone come over that wall."

Cassie's cheeks flushed and she checked on the progress of getting the Orbs secure. "They're almost ready," she called. "Do you want to launch as soon as they're aboard?"

"No." Christina shook her head. "If those people out there have anti-air weapons, we'll have a real problem. I want to know what we're up

against, *then* we'll launch. Once I get a visual, I'll order a couple strafing runs. That plus the turrets should be plenty depending on the size of force we're dealing with."

Cassie moved behind Christina, glancing over her shoulder at the tablet. A visual on the attackers came into view as focus developed. They were wearing black shirts and pants, carrying rifles. A quick count showed nearly a hundred combatants charging the perimeter.

Where the hell did they come from? How'd they get there without detection?

"Falcon One," Christina said, "initiate strafing run and slow their advance. Turrets, do *not* let them reach the wall." She turned to Cassie. "You're in charge here. I'm going to get a closer look at the situation."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Cassie asked. "We're not exactly equipped for it."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be back but when I give you the order, you get these shuttles out of here regardless. Understood?"

Cassie nodded, but she didn't agree with the order. Part of her wanted to push but there wasn't time for arguing. Technically, Christina was in charge. "I'll be here. Just … don't get killed over there."

"No intention of it." Christina rushed off and Cassie turned to the others, technicians who looked utterly terrified. She ushered them into the shuttles for cover and aimed her weapon outward, keeping her eyes open for anything out of the ordinary. Soldiers lined the walls on all sides but she had a bad feeling, something in her gut warning her. Sure enough, she saw someone slip over the wall to the north, not even fifty yards from the shuttles. Cassie took aim, noting they were wearing the same black uniform of the men charging from the east. She pulled the trigger, catching them in the leg and stomach with a quick burst. They dropped to the ground but continued to move. She finished them off with another burst.

"Contact north!" Cassie shouted into her com. "Someone slipped over the wall!"

"We see them," a marine replied. "Engaging."

Jump jets burst to life nearby and three power-armored suits flew

overhead, going over the wall. They landed with such force that the noise made Cassie's ears ring and more gunfire erupted. Fighters performed their strafing run, three ships leveling the terrain with gunfire. Energy blasts followed, purple light flashing in the east.

This is insanity!

"Get on board a shuttle," Christina's voice burst in her ear, "and launch immediately. Get the Orbs to the Gnosis right away. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

"Are you sure?" Cassie asked. "How do you know they don't have anti-aircraft weaponry?"

"I've done a scan and I'm pretty sure you're good, but we don't have the luxury of knowing. Launch. Now!"

Cassie directed the men to board the shuttles. "I want turrets online!" She stepped onto one of the ships and closed the ramp. "Pilots, engage thrusters and get us the hell out of here! Make straight for orbit."

A man tapped Cassie's arm, a Pahxin named Brexan. He was one of their technicians, a young man who came highly recommended for his understanding of advanced computer techniques. He looked utterly horrified, trembling as he gazed up at her. "Are we going to make it? Are we … Are we going to die?"

"No." Cassie gripped his hand firmly, staring into his eyes. "No, we're going to make it out of here. I promise. Just hold on tight and don't look outside. We've got this."

Brexan turned away, wiping sweat from his brow. The others looked just as nervous, just as shaken by the situation. Cassie couldn't blame them. She'd been through far more insanity than most of them and she still struggled with nerves. Especially with the continued gunfire erupting outside.

The shuttle began to move and Cassie gripped a safety handle before stumbling to one of the chairs. Marines manned the turrets and the madcap dash to escape began. She engaged the safety on her weapon and retrieved her tablet from her bag, peering at it for a decent view of the action.

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Chapter 3

Christina peered over the wall, running her scan. They were using small arms, primarily rifles. None of them had anything that could take down a shuttle and they sure as hell weren't prepared to pierce the walls. They must've thought they could scale them and engage the forces head on.

Or this is a distraction and something else is about to happen.

No one had attacked Gamma Alpha since the Orb was first discovered, not in any real threatening number at least. A couple minor terrorist groups made plays but they didn't count for much. Marines took those threats down easily and before anyone even got hurt. This was a brazen assault from an organized force.

Someone with resources to burn and a desire to cause trouble. Someone that didn't believe in the relationship being developed between the humans and the Pahxin. She guessed they had to be some kind of nihilistic regime or well-funded fringe organization. Either way, after the fight, whoever put the attack together would be getting a knock at their door.

I imagine the rest of the military is just itching for a fight.

Christina took aim and fired at a close by combatant just as the fighters performed their strafing run. She ducked down, watching as the swath of destruction tore bodies apart and scattered the forces in the wake of the assault. The marines didn't let up, firing at those who weren't killed in the attack.

Another force tried to come at them from the north but the aircraft immediately engaged, blasting away. Christina hopped down from her position, intent on getting to one of the shuttles. She paused in her step as a small cadre of enemies seemed to be charging across the tarmac, between the engaging marine forces.

"Contact!" Christina shouted into her mic, opening fire. Her first target went down in an instant, blood splattering everywhere. The others looked around, firing in seemingly random directions. Nevertheless, it was enough to drive Christina to take cover behind a

couple of large metal crates. “Moving toward the shuttles! Engage!”
A marine called back that they were on it. Christina peeked around, ready to fire but a couple of bullets slapped so close to her head, her entire body went rigid. Falling back to safety, she drew several deep breaths. *That was way too close*.
“Threats neutralized, agent,” a marine replied in a bored tone. “Proceed as you were.”
“Thanks,” Christina muttered. Her muscles tensed to move when she saw four more enemies, this time coming from the main gate. *How the hell did they avoid the guards?* She lifted her weapon and fired several quick bursts, moving the weapon to the left and right. They went down, though at least one of them wasn’t dead.
A shot slammed into the crate, less than a foot from her left side. Christina moved around to the opposite side of her cover, remaining crouched. “There!” She looked up in time to see a man charging her with a knife held over his head. He started screaming when he was halfway to her.
Christina shot him once in the torso and adjusted for the head. Just as she went to pull the trigger the second time, he was on her and she had to dodge aside as he slammed the knife into the crate. Spinning in place, she fired into his foot and he threw his weight against her but instead of taking her down, she stumbled back and let him hit the ground.
She put a final round in his head but the next one came at her, again with a knife. Hopping to the side, she kicked him in the gut then brought her rifle down on his back. He landed on his stomach and struggled to stand. A quick stomp to the back of his head made his face bounce on the pavement and he stopped moving.
Potential prisoner there. Christina ensured there weren’t more before leaving the crates behind, rushing toward the waiting shuttles. The pilots kept the engines idling. Nervous passengers shifted about in their seats with marines standing guard at the ramp. She nodded to the marines as she boarded, heading for the turret control. Someone grabbed her wrist.
Christina cast a glare at the person and sighed when she saw it was

Dulain.
“What the hell are *you* doing here?”
“I’m coming along with you,” Dulain said. “I couldn’t let you have all the fun. Looks like someone thought it would be a good idea to give us a hard time before we even got into space though.”
“Good observation.” Christina pulled her hand away. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a gun to take command of. Note for your record that I strongly protest your presence on this ship. It’s not safe and if something happens, the AIA is going to be in a lot of trouble.”
“Understood. Thank you for your concern.”
Christina took the turret seat, peering at the scanner. The fighters engaged enemy aircraft coming in but they met them at nearly ten miles out. Not much for a ship that could cover such territory in seconds but providing they held them there, the attackers would be contained.
Chaos bathed Gamma Alpha as the marines tore through dozens of enemy ground troops. Christina planned for a swift assault as a precaution which is why the marines were already in the turrets during the first wave. The fact they even tried it disappointed her. It wasn’t that she felt optimistic about humanity, but this attack said something about short sightedness.
If they succeeded, if they had destroyed the Orbs or even captured them, then all of the human race would suffer as a direct result. The Tol’An would effectively win before the fight really started. Nothing could stop them if they had all the devices that were still effective. Not that Earth would care much.
There was a chance, however unlikely, that blowing up the Orbs might well annihilate the Earth. Or at least that continent. Christina didn’t even want to think about it too much. She got Cassie on the com to check in as paranoia began chewing at her gut. “Hey, how’d it go? Everyone leave okay?”
“Yes,” Cassie replied. “We’re almost in orbit now. Are you okay?”
“I’m on a shuttle following you now.” Christina sighed. “And I’ve got bad news. Dulain’s with me.”
“What? Why? What’s he doing there? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“All great questions that I’m afraid we’ll have to ask later. Right now, we’re almost out of this mess.” Christina paused, watching the ground forces push the enemy out from the base. Text reports showed they were taking prisoners, which meant the military would learn who those guys worked for. “Looks like Gamma Alpha will be fine in a moment.”

“I saw some enemy aircraft. You don’t think they’re going to try to take us in space, do you?”

“No one should have the capability to take us on up there,” Christina replied. “Not on Earth anyway. I guess we could face a Pahxin threat … but that’s unlikely.” A red dot began flashing on the turret scanner and she noted that they were being pursued by an enemy fighter. It wouldn’t be able to chase them for long but it was trying to get a lock. *Okay then, let’s do this*. Christina gripped the controls and spun the gun around to their rear. She let the targeting computer do its work but it couldn’t get a tone. Their pursuer was about to fire … She pulled the trigger first. The energy blasts nearly got him but he bolted to the side, banking hard right.

Without going head on as fast as he could, the fighter couldn’t keep up. Nevertheless, Christina aimed again, this time using the reticle instead of the computer. Distance continued to broaden but she pulled the trigger, catching him right in the tail. Three good hits, pounding the hull and piercing the engines.

Fire erupted from the damage and something else caught a moment later, fuel of some kind. The entire ship went up in a fiery ball, bits of debris raining down on the ground below. No other enemies were within range. She settled back in her chair and took a deep breath, again turning to the ground reports.

“What happened?” Cassie asked. “I saw a flash.”

“Took out an enemy fighter,” Christina said. “Gamma Alpha’s secure. I think we’re good to go. Now to get aboard the Gnosis and make this happen. I hope your friends are ready to receive us … and the pain in the ass who will be aboard causing everyone a headache to boot. God, I can’t believe he came along.”

“I guess he wants to see his theories work first hand.” Cassie hesitated.

“We’ve broken orbit and are heading toward the ship. I’ll let you know when we’re safely aboard.”
“Thanks, Cassie. See you soon.” Christina rubbed her eyes before staring at the screen again. If those thugs had brought anti-air weaponry, things might’ve gone very differently. She wondered why they didn’t. Their attack made no sense. Putting together such an assault had to cost a lot of resources, both in men and weapons.
So why come ill-prepared?
Reasons flashed through Christina’s mind but she kept coming back to an explanation of crazy. Maybe their leader simply did not have a tactical mind. Part of her wanted to believe it. In fact, she found it quite plausible but the rest of her refused to give in. She’d been working intelligence too long to believe anyone would throw away forces like that without cause.
The challenge came from figuring out their trick before it was too late.

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Desmond received an urgent call from the bridge, Vincent’s personal signal. He clicked it on and stepped away, worry gnawing at his gut. No one would’ve bothered him without something terribly urgent, though if there was a problem with the Orbs, Admiral Reach might’ve been the first one to pick up a com.
“What’s going on?” Desmond asked. “Is everything okay?”
“There’s trouble on the surface,” Vincent replied. “Some force attacked Gamma Alpha with ground troops and a few fighters. Looks like our side is holding them off but the shuttles bolted out of there in a hurry. The Orbs are on their way and should be here soon. Cassie’s with them.”
“That’s at least good news.” Desmond cursed under his breath. He had had a bad feeling *something* was going to happen but he hadn’t imagined a full-on attack. Random infiltrators attempting to gain access made sense but fielding an assault force? Who had the balls to do it? “So is the situation down there contained?”
“So far, yes. I’ve received a message from Admiral Reach directly. He

said that when everything's secure, we're to depart immediately while establishing our hyperspace coordinates. They want us to be on our way before anything else can come up."
"Okay, I trust Zach has that midway course laid in?"
"Yes, sir. We're ready to go on your mark."
"What about security for the shuttles before they land?" Desmond asked. "Do we have to scramble our fighters?"
"Negative, the Gamma Alpha squadron will see them safely to our hangar."
"Thanks. I'll remain down here to facilitate getting the orbs where they belong. Desmond out." He returned to Darren and filled him in on the news. The marine shook his head, looking utterly annoyed.
"Whatever faction chose to do that is in for a real ass beating, you know that, right?"
"I'm pretty sure Reach and the others are going to put a hurt on them, yes." Desmond shrugged. "It's what they wanted and I guess they got it. In any event, no one thought this would be uneventful and no one here can really field any sort of space attack force worth mentioning. It had to be on the ground or nothing."
"Sounds like they didn't try very hard, honestly." Darren checked his tablet. "Yep. As I expected. The number of attackers couldn't possibly have taken Gamma Alpha and any military commander worth their salt would know that. They needed some artillery, some decent vehicles and real air cover. This … this looks like some kind of distraction."
"Yeah?" Desmond hummed. "For what? All the people we're bringing on board were already in position."
"We'll have to look through all the records again to make sure we've still got the right people. Anyone out of place will need to be locked up until the conclusion of the mission."
"I agree with that." Desmond nodded. "Okay, I'm going to let you handle that side of the security. I'll be the nice guy."
"The 'welcome aboard' type?"
Desmond nodded, drawing a grunt from Darren.
"Must be nice."

“I can’t complain.” Desmond looked back at the tablet, watching as the shuttles broke orbit. There were five total vessels inbound. They anticipated the one with the Orbs coming into their area, but the others would need to put in at the other hangar. This one was totally locked down. “Since we’re leaving in such a hurry, we won’t be able to wait for all the shuttles.”

“We leaving them behind?” Darren asked.

“I was thinking we could just lock them down until we finish with the Orbs then let security check them out.” Desmond shrugged. “Some of the key personnel may be on board.”

Darren frowned, adopting the expected expression of annoyance. “I don’t like it and you know why.”

“Because we’ve got a plan but have to break it?”

Darren nodded.

“But don’t you guys pride yourselves on improvising?”

That drew a chuckle from Darren. “In battle, that means something very different from keeping saboteurs and criminals away from sensitive material. When we’re protecting something, you’ll find we’re pretty damn rigid.”

“I get that but let’s be as flexible as we can be. There *was* an attack down there.”

“Which was seemed to be designed to break up our plan,” Darren pointed out. “I’ll make it work, we just have to keep in mind that someone’s probably shoving us in this direction. I hope they end up figuring it out on Earth because we’re going to be a locked room mystery for God knows how many hours otherwise.”

Desmond didn’t disagree but he hoped Darren proved to be wrong. They had already vetted the people coming aboard and they’d have a few hours to do so again while they moved into position for the hyperspace jump. If anyone seemed out of place, they’d detain them. That was the best they could do considering the circumstances.

And with everything at stake, Desmond had to take some chances. The whole operation was going to be a risk. This random attack proved them all right.

***

Vincent maintained a cool disposition on the outside, but when he received the report concerning the attack, he had a moment of panic. Cassie didn't need him to protect her, he'd accepted that fact when she went on her first mission away from the ship. It didn't stop him from worrying, regardless if he could bring it up with anyone.

Once he reported to Desmond and felt things were under control on the Gnosis, he opened a private channel to Cassie on the approaching shuttle. Coms were waylaid by all the activity and he had to fiddle with his computer for several moments before he found a solid frequency that would allow for a decent conversation.

"Agent Alexander on the line." Hearing her voice filled him with far more relief than the text report showing she'd made it away.

"Hey, it's Vincent. I was checking in." He didn't want it to sound like he'd specifically contacted her solely to check on her. *I doubt she'd approve*. "The reports came in about the attack but they were a little light on how you got out of there."

"It was insane," Cassie replied. Her voice sounded digitized for a moment before clearing up. "I was hoping you'd be Major Dawson. She stayed behind and I don't know if she made it out. It looked like those people were throwing themselves at our defenses, Vincent … totally unconcerned with dying."

"Terrorists, probably," Vincent said. "Like the Tol'An. Total zealots who just want to get the job done at all costs."

"Maybe. There are a lot of questions about this. Why now? How'd they find out about the Orbs being moved? Who's behind them and what did they honestly hope to gain? I've got a feeling we'll be talking about them for a while." She paused. "That's … not really why you contacted me though, is it?"

Vincent's cheeks flushed. "I … guess not." He cleared his throat. "Yes, I wanted to be sure you were okay … hear your voice I mean."

"I appreciate the concern," Cassie replied. "Sincerely."

"Right on." Vincent looked over his shoulder, noting Salina's disapproving gaze. "Um … I should probably clear the channel. I'll see

you soon?"
"Yeah … experiment time, right?"
"Indeed. Bowman out." He disconnected the line and shrugged. "You can stop now."
"I suppose I'm more disappointed in myself for not noticing," Salina replied, turning back to her post, "than in you for that romantic moment."
Vincent smiled. "That means we've been subtle."
"More like I don't pay attention to workplace romance." Salina shook her head. "Or maybe I'm simply not observant at all."
Zach laughed. "You're about as romantic as a sour fish, Salina. No offense … but I think a lack of caring about it is what's holding you back."
"Anyway," Vincent interrupted. "Let's get back to work, shall we? We've got some shuttles to bring on board and some security measures I'd like to ensure we don't foul up. Get me an ETA to our departure coordinates. With any luck, we'll be able to hop out of the system without further delay."

***

Cassie's shuttle docked with the Gnosis and the doors promptly closed behind them. Apparently, all the other shuttles were redirected to the other hangar. Each of the passengers needed to be vetted again, a process they would likely complain about vehemently. Those with the Orbs would travel through the ship with them and be checked by security there.
When the doors opened, she disembarked first but two marines stopped her. They wore their power armor and looked quite severe. Both of them had to know who she was and yet they detained her until Desmond and Darren arrived. No one else even tried to leave. The situation seemed to have them spooked enough.
"Hey, Cassie," Desmond said. "I'm glad you made it back safe."
"You guys had them detain me too?" She asked. "Really?"
"I said everyone," Darren replied. "That meant you too. Anyway,

we're going to check these people out while the Orbs are transported to their destination. The tech crew here will move them."
Desmond added, "Why don't you escort the devices while we take care of our new guests? Thayne and Gil are down there and will take over when they arrive."
"Sure …" Cassie looked at them both, feeling unsure of what they were up to. They couldn't have possibly suspected her of some wrongdoing. That made zero sense. *Whatever, this isn't the time to complain or cause a scene.* "I'll speak to you on the bridge then, sir? Or perhaps in the research lab?"
"I'll be down to the lab shortly," Desmond said. "Wait for me there."
"Yes, sir." Cassie stepped away as the tech crews secured the Orbs and moved them out. She followed them, casting an uneasy glance behind her before she left the room. Half way down the hallway, she reached out to Christina again, tapping into the private channel they established during their ambassadorial mission together. "Major Dawson, do you read?"
The line picked up immediately. "Agent Alexander, do you have something to report? We're on lockdown in one of the hangars."
"Yeah, I saw it happen on our shuttle, too. The marines and captain are checking over the passengers again."
"Good," Christina replied. "It's necessary. We both know there could be trouble so I'm glad to see the crew's taking it so seriously. What's your position now?"
Cassie paused, noting the marines stationed every ten feet along the corridor. "Heading to the research lab. It's about the most well defended passage since the three hundred Spartans defended the hot gates. We're fine over here. Has anyone told you how long you're going to be stuck on the shuttle?"
"No, and thankfully, no one's hurt." Christina lowered her voice. "Dulain's being a bit prissy about it though. He doesn't like being told where he has to sit and for how long. He must've been a real pain in primary school."
Cassie couldn't help but chuckle. "I'll see what I can do about expediting your departure. Alexander out." She put her tablet away

and continued the somber, silent march to bring the Orbs to where they belonged. There wasn't nearly as much ceremony when they took the new one off the ship but then again, no one knew it was coming. They brought them into the massive chamber and went about attaching them to the preinstalled pedestals under Thayne's watchful eye. None of them even spoke and she started to feel like she'd been thrust into some kind of strange nightmare. The marines took up positions at the door, standing on either side with their weapons crossing their chests.

This seems beyond paranoid at this point. We got them here. They should be safe. Especially since the only people who potentially could want to cause trouble are held up in shuttles waiting to be let go.

Neither of the Pahxin scientists bothered to look in her direction. They were intent on their work, preparing the area for the experiments to come. Gil in particular studied some panel off to the side, clearly not a human piece of technology. Their new allies brought several pieces of equipment on board to supplement the trials.

Desmond entered the room a moment later, clapping his hands. "Well, those look ready to go." He turned to Cassie. "What do you think of the accommodations? We had to make some modifications to allow all this gear to operate and have plenty of space for the various scientists and technicians."

"Sir, the head of the AIA is on one of the shuttles," Cassie said. "He's with Major Dawson right now. We might want to expedite whatever security measures we're taking."

Desmond's brow lifted. "Isn't that Beaumont Dulain? I wasn't aware of him coming aboard. Does that strike you as odd?"

Cassie sighed. "Not if you knew him … I guess. He's a big cat and does whatever he wants. I'm sure he's here to observe the project and offer … whatever it is he thinks he's bringing to the table. I can be honest with you and say I'm not thrilled that he's on board but you and I both know how much clout he holds."

"Okay. I'll be sure we get him taken care of right away. Those involved in this experiment will be housed on this deck. Only key individuals will have access after we lock it down. I know that you

were meant to be in on this too so you might want to go to your quarters and grab anything you'll need."
"How long will we be in hyperspace?" Cassie asked. "I didn't know we'd have to … well … sleep down here."
"Almost thirty-six hours though the destination isn't that far from what I'm told." Desmond shrugged. "Apparently, we're taking a less efficient route to buy ourselves more time. Anyway, take care of what you need to and I'll make sure our VIP has a nice place to stay. Maybe he'll see fit to give me an explanation for his unannounced visit."
"Good luck." Cassie smirked. "I doubt he's explained himself to anyone in his whole life."
"I'll try to be persuasive." Desmond patted her on the shoulder. "See you later."

***

Dulain read his tablet, patiently waiting for one of the high-level ship representatives to arrive. He figured they'd send the first officer or the commander of the marines. When Captain Bradford stepped aboard, he was actually a little surprised. He didn't know if reputation warranted the leader of the entire ship but he wasn't going to complain.
"Captain." Dulain stood and shook the man's hand. "Thank you for coming to see us. We've been here for the better part of an hour. Any chance we can disembark soon?"
"As you know, security is tight," Bradford said. "We need to vet the rest of the crew of this shuttle, but you and Major Dawson can leave now. If you'd come with me, I'll escort you to your quarters. We're putting you with the Orbs. That is, if you're here to observe the experiments."
"Indeed." Dulain smiled. Maybe Agent Alexander talked about his interest in the situation. Either way, the captain wanted to make a point. He knew some things and though he might not have the whole story, he had a good start. Taking him into confidence seemed foolish but it might be necessary before they finished the mission. "Dawson?

You ready?"
Christina joined them, covered in sweat and black stuff. When she messed around on the wall with the marines, she must've gotten filthy. He hadn't been in the field for a long time and one look at her made him grateful. She scowled at his scrutiny but he maintained his grin, trying to show some positivity.
"The Gnosis is a fine ship," Dulain said as they disembarked the shuttle. "I'm proud to be on board."
Bradford nodded. "Thank you. This trip will be a first for many reasons."
Dulain glanced back at Christina and she shrugged. He redirected to the captain. "How so?"
"We've never performed a hyperspace jump for such a length of time for one. Second, having both Orbs aboard may have some unforeseen effect on our trip. No one can really say if they'll interfere with some system or other."
"I assume we've taken some precautions." Dulain tried to keep the alarm out of his voice but for the first time since he snuck aboard the shuttle, he began to regret his decision. He assumed the ship wouldn't be any more or less dangerous than when they brought home the second Orb. And hyperspace had been proven to be safe.
"As many as we can," Bradford replied. "The Orbs are segregated to their own area and we've sealed it up as much as possible. All systems are also shielded but of course, as you know, we've barely scratched the surface of what these devices are capable of. They could, at any moment, do something inexplicable."
"You seem rather calm about it," Dulain said.
Bradford shrugged. "I've found that it's worthless to get overly passionate about the unknown. We've found preparing for it and reacting is better than living in anticipation of some horror to come."
"I suppose that's a fair point." Dulain slowed down to stand beside Christina. He whispered to her, "Did you know anything about this?"
"Agent Alexander and I did discuss it, yes."
"And you didn't think to put it in your report?"
Christina smirked. "Sir, you ordered us to secure the Orbs and get

them on the Gnosis. That was our focus. The conversation about danger and hyperspace was an aside while we were having lunch. It wouldn't have made the report because it wasn't relevant to our assignment. Why?" She paused. "Are you regretting your decision to come along?"

"That's enough out of you." Dulain advanced to catch up to the captain, fighting off his irritation. He'd feel better when he had a chance to get cleaned up and change. They weren't leaving for a while, so he technically still had a chance to change his mind. Of course, such a thing wouldn't do well for his reputation.

Of course, it wouldn't matter much if he died. Then again, if he was gone, so too would the Orbs and along with them, Earth's only hope to survive the coming storm. With that sobering fact in mind, he focused on what he could do to help ensure success rather than worry about his own skin.

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Chapter 4

Four hours later, they entered hyperspace for their long journey. Deacon took the first watch, allowing Zach to get some downtime. Vincent held the bridge while Desmond visited the research deck where scientists and technicians were setup to make several attempts to interface with the Orbs.

As the captain stepped off the elevator, the marines stood at attention but he waved them down to stand at ease. Guards covered each of the entry points, even the doors into quarters. *Darren's more paranoid than I thought he would be*. Desmond thought. *I hope it pays off*.

He entered the massive bay where the Orbs were kept. Several beds were positioned near the pedestals with medical equipment attached to each. They were put in place to watch the vital signs of the human subjects, people who very likely had no interest in volunteering for this mess but didn't have a choice.

Dulain stood with Christina in the corner as she pointed to various systems throughout the room, probably explaining the setup to the buffoon. Desmond didn't really care for the head of the AIA. He seemed entirely too fake, too caught up in his position to be effective. The real work came from his agents, who put their lives on the line for him.

Cassie stood alone off to the right, working on her tablet. Desmond approached and gently touched her shoulder. "How're you holding up? You ready for this craziness?"

"I'm not." Cassie shook her head. "I'd rather not do it, if I'm to be perfectly honest." She paused. "Um … Where's Vin—Commander Bowman?"

"I gave him the bridge while I came down to inspect the deck," Desmond replied. He tilted his head. "Did you want to see him before … well … before this happens?"

"Kind of, yes." Cassie took a deep breath. "Would it be too much trouble?"

Desmond shook his head. "Not at all. I'll wrap up what I'm doing here

and send him down. Isn't Doctor Harper here?"
"Yes." Cassie gestured to the corner. "She's been back there messing with the interface wiring for a while. I guess she isn't happy with the readings she's getting from the Orbs. If you don't know, she can be very particular."
"So I've seen. I'll leave her to it and get out of everyone's hair."
Desmond hesitated to go. "Why don't you head over to your temporary quarters and Vincent can meet you there? Would that be alright?"
Cassie smiled nervously and nodded. "That would be great. Thank you."
Desmond nodded to Dulain when he noticed the man staring at him and he headed out, moving for the elevator. The tension in that room made his skin feel tight. Everyone was worried about it, except the people who didn't understand it probably. That would be technicians and Dulain specifically.
The marines held the deck, the researchers and techs were about to begin the experiment, and everything seemed in order. Desmond sent a quick message to Vincent asking him to head down for a conference with Cassie in her quarters. After that, he'd spend the next shift on the bridge, hoping everything went smoothly.
Aside from the attack on Gamma Alpha, everything looked copacetic.

***

Cassie fretted in her quarters. The first time she interfaced with the Orb had been an accident, it happened quickly and she didn't have a choice in the matter. They'd deliberately attempted to get the interface to work again on Earth but it didn't seem as possible there. Especially with Dulain's theory that they needed to be in hyperspace.
A knock on the door made her jump and she opened up right away. Vincent stood there wearing a worried expression. "The captain said you needed to talk to me." He paused when he really looked at her, then stepped inside. She hugged him the moment the door closed.
"Whoa, you're not okay."

“No,” Cassie said. “This terrifies me. I don’t know why. Something about it really has me on edge.”
“Can you go through with it?” Vincent asked.
“I don’t have a choice.”
Vincent hummed. “There’s always a choice. Always. Can you do it?”
“I will … because they’re right. I’m the only person who’s ever done it. If I don’t try, I risk everything but it doesn’t make it any easier.”
Cassie stepped back. “I’m all about duty and putting it on the line for humanity … I really am. But now, I feel weak for being afraid and since I wasn’t even thinking twice about it the first time, I worry that I’ll screw up the experiment.”
“There’s no denying how important this is,” Vincent said. “But it’s going to work or it isn’t. We’ve done everything we can to stack the odds in our favor. I know you can’t control your feelings but you just have to go with the flow a little bit, don’t punish yourself for being scared. Anyone would be in your situation.”
Cassie looked into his eyes for a long, lingering moment. There were things she almost said, a few she didn’t know if she should and several which wouldn’t have been appropriate given the circumstances. Some part of her screamed that she should talk before it was too late. After she went into the research lab, she might never have the chance again.
“We’ve been through a lot together.” Cassie touched his cheek. “Especially the last mission.”
“There’ll be plenty more.” Vincent smiled. “I have faith in you … and all those brilliant weirdos down the hall too.”
“When this one’s over and we’re back home …” Cassie swallowed hard. “I want to get at least an afternoon off. Just a few hours so we can leave Gamma Alpha and be alone. Would you help me accomplish that?”
“Of course.” Vincent nodded. “Absolutely.”
“Thank you. I—”
A voice in the hall called her name and Cassie sighed. “I guess they’re playing my number, huh?”
“I guess so.” Vincent hugged her tightly. “Do you want me to stay

down here? The captain took the bridge for the rest of this shift and I'm sure I can make up an excuse to stick around."
"I'm not sure you want to." Cassie stepped away and opened the door. "But I'd love to know you were nearby."
"I won't be far away. I promise."
"I believe you." Cassie left the room, steadying herself for the experiment. Doctor Max Stevens waited to escort her back to the room, one of the Gamma Alpha personnel. He yammered on about their plan and what it meant to her and she could tell he was pretty nervous too.
More likely because he'd never been in hyperspace before.
Doctor Harper stood with her hands on her hips as Cassie arrived. "There you are!" She sounded grumpy. "Do get into position, Agent Alexander. We are on a strict timeline here!"
Cassie went to her designated bed and crawled onto it. Doctor Stevens closed a monitoring cuff over her left bicep and stepped away. The whole thing felt like a torture chamber but she had to put such thoughts out of her mind. Worry would just make the vitals spike and she had no idea what they'd do if that happened.
Her eyes found Vincent and she smiled before turning her attention to the ceiling. Whatever happened next would help humanity, that was how she spun it to herself. It was time to focus on the positive and make something happen. Even as the tension rose around her, she took deep, calming breaths. Whatever happened next, she felt prepared.

***

Gil Vaedra knew Orb technology. He studied it extensively while still in school and discussed theories of how much they might have impacted the entire universe with their power and data. Before he even finished primary school, he'd been allowed to visit the facility and see the Orb in person, witnessing firsthand how scientists used it every day to solve problems.
Ultimately, his field of study took him away from such wonders into

the ancient world of archaeology, but they didn't have many qualified scientists to study the item. Their experiment had never been tried by the Pahxin so in a way, he got to be part of an amazing piece of history. If it worked, they'd be talking about it for generations.
Though he would likely have to give most of the credit to Thayne Rindala, his colleague and longtime friend. That man had been studying Orb technology since he could crawl and forgot more about it than most would ever know. He worked close by, taking readings from one of the interface panels.
Other Pahxin scientists arrived to help but even though they'd worked with these devices before, they deferred to Thayne when it came to questions or concerns. The Tol'An had captured the right man to discover what they needed to know but unfortunately for them, they wasted his talents tracking down more Orbs.
If they would've taken him to their secret base and put him to work deciphering data, they might've had a distinct advantage over the other cultures in the galaxy. When they lost him to the humans, they were relieved of the greatest advantage they ever stole and would likely never enjoy such a benefit again.
Especially if the experiment proved successful.
Gil turned to Doctor Harper as she began to explain their first attempt. "Agent Alexander was performing deep scans of the Orb when she was struck with the initial interface. We were unable to replicate these effects on Earth so we will be trying the same thing now. She will hit the button and we will monitor her brain activity."
"What exactly is this doing to the Agent?" One of the other doctors asked. "Do we have any idea?"
"I'm afraid not," Harper replied. "When we examined her there were no abnormalities and nothing was physically wrong. However, it is our belief that she has been 'opened' to communication with the devices. Once connected, she may be able to do so again far easier. That's why we must replicate the conditions of the first success."
Gil asked, "Are we thinking that she opened the lines of communication then? That her scan somehow triggered the effect?"
"Indeed," Harper replied. "If we are all prepared, we can get started. If

this attempt does not work, we have a variety of suggestions from different researchers. They are listed by priority in your tablets. Alright, Agent Alexander, we will begin the experiment shortly. Scribe, please announce to security that we will be starting in five seconds."

Gil took a seat, turning his attention to the screen with Agent Alexander's vitals on it. He didn't know exactly what they'd be looking for, what was bad or good, but until the Orb showed signs of activity, he didn't have anything else to focus on. Everyone fell silent as they counted down the few moments until they initiated the scan. Something shocked him, a sharp pain hitting his right hand first before quickly spreading to the rest of his body. He winced, gritting his teeth against the agony before slumping back in his chair. The abrupt sensation seemed to numb his nerves, rendering him incapable of moving.

Gil became aware of someone standing beside him, saying his name but he couldn't make out their voice or tell who they were. A strong hand slapped his face and he bolted upright, dull music pounding in his ringing ears. His mouth tasted like dry dust and he could barely see.

"This can't be him," a man's voice said nearby. "Look at him. This guy's been drinking for three days. Probably more."

"It's him," came a response. That person sounded familiar. An old colleague? No … an employer. A man who was willing to pay for help on old dig sights across the universe. He'd paid for Gil's long excursions to drinking establishments many times over. He was Quinda Folle from the Kalrawv Group. Definitely *not* a friend. "Sober up, Gil. We need to talk."

"I'm not sure I like your tone," Gil replied. "And I'm busy, if you can't tell."

"Yeah, we see." Quinda sat across from him. "We need you for a job. It's close by but we can't figure out how to get into the damn place. We'll triple your normal rates but we've got to get you out of here right away. What do you say?"

"You sound desperate." Gil rubbed his eyes, blinking several times.

Quinda's long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, his beady eyes squinting out beneath a wrinkled brow. "I'm not sure I can take triple from desperate men."
"What do you want then?" Quinda sighed. "Listen, you've got an advantage on us here because we're in a damn hurry. I don't normally spill it this fast and you know it so come on. Tell us what you want so we can get on with our lives. No one has time for the way you like to play around with prices."
"Okay, if you want to be like that." Gil sat up straight, which required some effort. The odd numbness seemed to subside. He briefly wondered at the strange dream he had, of being on some bizarre spaceship with a lesser life form light years away but he put it aside. "I'll do it for five times my usual rate and a cut of whatever we find."
"I'll do the five times," Quinda said. "But what we find is ours. You don't want any part of it anyway."
"Why not?"
"Because." Quinda shrugged. "I don't have to tell you everything. If you figure it out while we're there, so be it but I'm not talking about it before then. Are you in or not?"
Gil weighed the options, thinking about his dwindling account. They wouldn't spot him a tab at the bar for much longer and he needed to pay for his room somehow. There were no other prospects, not legitimate ones so why not go with the Kalrawv? They may be total scum, but they always paid reliably.
"Why not?" Gil replied, pushing to his feet. "Lead on to your ship, Quinda. I'm sure this will be another fine and illegal adventure to put under my belt."
"You should watch your tone in here," Quinda rasped. "I don't want station security to bother us."
"Oh, please. You know full well these idiots don't bother with anything short of straight murder and mayhem." Gil chuckled, clapping Quinda on the shoulder. "No, we could practically talk about the downfall of the Pahxin government and the rise of the Tol'An and no one would blink twice."
"I'm glad you're so cavalier." Quinda shrugged away from him.

“Hurry up. I want you cleaned up. You smell like a brewery and something worse. Help him along if you have to. He looks a bit slow.”
Gil followed along, musing about his dream but far more distracted by all the money he was about to make. All for a little stolen old-world tech from some dead culture long in its grave. He wondered what sort of foolishness Kalrawv wanted in on this time and whether or not he’d be accused of a war crime.
It wouldn’t be the first time.

***

Heat sat alone in the control center, going over the security logs for all the newcomers to the ship. The chaos of the attack had everyone on edge and so each new passenger came under strict scrutiny. This meant that the light duty guy was given the job of vetting each of them, going through their records and ensuring they were legitimate. Some were still on their shuttles and those folks filed complaints. No one would care. Security on this project superseded comfort. Two people were given exceptions by Captain Bradford and they were both confirmed members of the AIA. Heat still would’ve liked to have them searched and checked but he kept that to himself.
Nearly twenty-five people came aboard. A few doctors, a bunch of scientists and some technicians who supposedly specialized in the Orb technology. Those last ones were who Heat focused his efforts on. Of the different crews, they made the least amount of money and came from various walks of life.
The researchers spent all their time at Gamma Alpha. They were practically heroes in some circles and most of them were known by name and reputation. As Heat checked their various dossiers, he quickly confirmed they were on the level. The technicians required more work. They plied their trade to far more positions than their superiors did.
The first several came back clean according to the files delivered by the AIA. Heat took a moment to rub his eyes, yawning from boredom. He’d never been particularly great at paperwork. There was a reason

he went into the infantry. Shooting things made sense to him. Hunting through mountains of files for a traitor never fit his career goals.
But he wasn't the only one doing the work either. Some computer guy in a different lab also checked the work. Protocol demanded a member of physical security do the same work as the techs but it didn't make a whole lot of sense. Unless they suspected one or the other might also be a traitor.
Jesus Christ, we have a lot of paranoia going on around here.
The thought made him tired. On the battlefield, things tended to be much simpler. Enemies shot at him, he shot back. They conquered a facility, blasted an ammo depot, or took out vehicles. There was no wondering if one of his marines might shoot him in the back. That sort of thing lived only in the world of the AIA and back at HQ. Essentially, where people didn't have enough to do so they looked around for trouble.
"Experiment commencing in five seconds." The voice piped into his speakers because he was in one of the security centers. Few people on the rest of the ship would've had such a warning. He peripherally wondered about it but didn't really care. He had another twelve files to go through and after Captain Gabriel told him not to screw up, he intended to be thorough.
"Initiating scan intensity."
What the hell does that even mean? Heat wondered. *Must be what made Agent Alexander go into the thing the first time. Lucky her that she gets to try again.*
A sharp pain caught him just behind the left eye and Heat winced, falling back into his seat. He rubbed at the offended area, gritting his teeth as the discomfort intensified. A moment passed and he couldn't see, his entire body felt numb. Drawing a deep, rasping breath, he flopped back into his chair, struggling to remain conscious.
Heat tried to lift his arm, to hit the com button to call for help. He couldn't even open his mouth let alone articulate words. His limbs ignored his commands, his body lost all feeling. Light pressed against his eyes, a bright white color that threatened to make him ill. He wanted to turn away but he couldn't even let his head lull to the side.

In an instant, he was standing outside on a ridge high over a facility located in a valley. Chill air bit at his cheeks and low clouds cast flecks of freezing rain on him. He carried a rifle in his right hand, a scanner in the left and he became aware of a squad of men behind him. Six at least.

Sergeant … no, Corporal Lawrence Gorman stepped up beside him. "We've finished the recon of the path to the east. It leads straight down to the target but Anderson's sure it's trapped … or at least monitored. Before you ask, the drones didn't show any signs of tech. It could be something new though."

Heat blinked several times, feeling oddly out of place. He ran a hand over his thigh but there was no wound. Flexing the muscle gave further proof. *What the hell happened?* When he turned to Gorman, his heart nearly stopped. *He died. Totally obliterated on that other planet … we had a service and everything.*

Was it all a dream? The Gnosis, traveling the stars, the Tol'An terrorists … made up in a fever dream?

"Yo, Heat?" Gorman snapped his fingers. "You with me, man?"

"Yeah, I'm with you," Heat grumbled. "So Anderson thinks they've developed something our scanners can't detect? Some kind of … I don't know … bioengineered shit?"

Gorman shrugged. "Must've been. How do you want to proceed?"

They brought climbing gear and were prepared to scale the wall. Before the mission, Heat saw the holo-maps and knew there was no reason to try the paths but it would've been crazy not to check them out. As he peered down the hill at the facility below, he had to consider whether they'd be seen against the rocky cliff.

Night time is less than two hours off. And these suits will defy scanners so we should be good.

"We'll descend here," Heat said. "At dusk, we go." He stepped away, shaking off the strange vision that distracted him earlier. When they got back to base, he might need to talk to someone about it but until then, he needed to focus on the task at hand. It wouldn't be an easy climb, even with advanced tech but it would give them the element of surprise.

***

Cassie felt a stinging sensation slap her in the face just as the technician stopped counting. She closed her eyes, biting her lip and trying not to cry out in terror. Warmth spread up her feet, sliding up her legs past her knees and to her hips. Like being submerged in water, she began to feel weightless but something pressed upon her stomach and chest.

Breathing became difficult. She labored as if sprinting a great distance. Her eyes flew open and she stood in a long corridor with light on either end. The metal ceiling seemed to only be two feet above her head and if she put her arms out to either side she wouldn't be able to hold them straight before touching the walls.

A sense of claustrophobia threatened to overwhelm her but she pushed on, desperate to reach the other side. Entering the tunnel had given her a brief fit of fear, a sense of terror that she might never get to the other side. No one talked about this part of the course and she couldn't think of a good reason for it to exist.

What could this possibly teach me? It's like running down a ventilation shaft.

Something clamored behind her, a sound of metal on metal. Cassie glanced over her shoulder, gasping as she saw a figure pursuing her. She had a head start but she'd been running for some time. Chances of staying ahead were slim to say the least. Especially if they were fresh before coming after her.

She's already been through the obstacle course and finished the swimming section. Her limbs complained under the strain and her chest felt like a foreign object took up residence. A pain in her side began to grow and she worried the muscles in her legs might be cramping. Whoever was behind her would be there soon.

Can I make it to the end of the tunnel before they catch me? Cassie hated the idea of a conflict in the closed quarters. That tunnel would make a brawl difficult but might offer her the advantage over a larger foe. Providing she wasn't so beat. Any conflict might be lost before it even

began.
Cassie tried to gauge how much further she had to go before she'd reach the end of the tunnel. She guessed sixty yards but she didn't trust her judgement just then. The person behind her might be twice that distance away but the way their metal soled shoes hit the ground, the echoing sound made it hard to tell.
Drawing upon a reserve of energy she didn't think she possessed, Cassie pushed herself harder, grunting as she made another sprint.
The sky came into view ahead, blue and brilliant in the early summer morning. Clouds drifted by, lazy with a light wind. The serenity of it mocked her discomfort, frustrating her.
"You won't make it!" A man's voice shouted behind her, full of rage and menace. "You'll never finish this course, you worthless little slag. Quit now and I'll bring you back to the beginning. You can wash out with some grace rather than be dragged home in a sweaty, exhausted mess."
Cassie didn't waste words on them. She'd never heard the person before but she already hated them. Perhaps that was the point. Everything about her time with the AIA had been a test. Classes themselves were little more than opportunities for the instructors to push their buttons, to see what made them tick.
She realized early on that she wouldn't start learning anything brand new until the hazing portion of her lessons ended. When she passed their physical requirements and moved on to the real training, then she'd know what the organization was all about. The first stage was there to see if they had what it took to be spies.
Then they got to learn how to do the work.
Fresh air hit her face. Cassie could count the steps before she'd be free from the tunnel. Twenty paces at most. Green grass spread out before her. The finish line to the entire course sat at the other end of a small field. Depending on what the jackass behind her did, it could be a straight shot to completing her test.
Three paces before the entrance, strong hands grabbed her shirt and yanked her back. Cassie cried out, slamming hard into the man's body. He tried to wrap his arm around her throat but she tucked her chin

down instinctively and grabbed at his hand. They began to struggle. Adrenaline took her limbs.

"Give up!" He grunted in her ear. "Stop pretending you can win! You're mine. I've already got you. No one's escaped me when I've caught them in the tunnel. Face it. You were weak."

Cassie struggled, her mind threatening to wander to some crazy dream of a spaceship and other planets, traveling faster than light and a man … Vincent Bowman. Some part of her refused to let go of him, refused to cast him off as a fantasy. What the hell was going on? Why would her mind betray her at such a pivotal moment?

The fight continued and she refused to give up but her strength faltered. Some part of her didn't want to give up but she knew she might not have a choice. Tensing up, she tried to squirm free. She had maybe two minutes before her opponent would win and she'd exhaust herself past the point of escape.

Think, Cassie! You've got this. Don't give up now … but … but who is Vincent? Damn it, girl! Focus! Just … focus.

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Chapter 5

Vincent stood near the door as they initiated the experiment, hitting the scanning frequency Cassie used the first time. At first, nothing seemed to happen. He figured they would need to go much deeper but then Gil went rigid and slumped in his chair. Cassie's body went stiff and she seemed to fall unconscious.

One of the Pahxin physicians tended to Gil and with the help of Doctor Stevens, they moved him onto one of the beds. Harper stood beside Cassie, holding her scanner over the agent's head. Vincent tried to remain still, attempted to give them space to work but he couldn't handle it.

Vincent moved over to Harper. "Did it work?" He asked. "Has she made contact with the Orb?"

"I can't tell." Harper sighed. "Something obviously happened as she's in a catatonic state right now." She turned toward Gil. "Is he okay?"

"Also catatonic," the Pahxin said. "It happened the moment we began the experiment, just like Agent Alexander."

"Orb activity has increased," Thayne added. "I'm definitely seeing some sort of reaction from the devices."

"Then I'd say we were at least partially successful." Harper's eyes narrowed. "Will they remember what they see as she did the first time? Why did it impact Gil but none of us? I want a full analysis of blood work right away. And continue scanning brainwaves with an alarm for any dramatically increased activity."

Vincent started to ask a question but Harper held up her hand to stop him. "I'm sorry, commander but I don't have time right now. We'll give a full report when we're not in the middle of something monumental. I'm sure you understand." She gestured for the others. "Let's make this quick! Come on!"

Dulain approached, touching Vincent on the arm to grab his attention. "This is what we were hoping for, Commander. Not exactly as we wanted it, but some reaction is better than none. Truth be told, I thought for sure we'd be struggling with this for hours before we saw

any sort of success."
"I'm glad you're pleased." Vincent couldn't help but be snide. "We're talking about people's lives. God knows what they're suffering right now. Or if they'll ever recover from it."
"Price of saving humanity." Dulain shrugged. "The ends justifying the means and all that. We're dealing with an alien threat that could wipe out multiple cultures. Agent Alexander and … that other fellow understand the risks. How do you not?" He paused, his brows lifting as he noted Vincent's scowl. "Oh … I think I understand."
"Do you?" Vincent clenched his fist. "What is it you suddenly get?"
"You … and Agent Alexander." Dulain gestured to Cassie. "Don't tell me you and she … I mean … and she…"
"I don't think it's any of your business."
"On the contrary, she's a member of a secretive organization but we don't generally have secrets from each other. I didn't know." Dulain rubbed his chin. "Unless she's play acting. I suppose that's possible. You're rather earnest to be of interest to most agents. Of course, she's pretty young …"
"That's enough," Vincent interrupted. "If you'll excuse me, Mister Dulain, I need to report in."
Stepping into the hall, Vincent let the door close before he let his shoulders slump. A moment of rage threatened to overwhelm him, the same emotion that prompted him to nearly punch Dulain in the face. Somehow, he refrained though he wasn't entirely sure where he found the discipline. *Probably for the best.*
A couple deep breaths put him in the proper state of mind to contact Captain Bradford. He established a com link to the bridge. "Captain, I've got news from down here."
"Go ahead," Desmond said. "We heard they initiated the experiment."
"It seems to have worked but Cassie *and* Gil are both in a catatonic state. They're running tests to find out what's happening to them."
"Understood." Desmond paused. "We've got *many* hours to figure it out but I'd recommend they hurry nevertheless. Anything else going on down there?"
"Not at present. It seems we're doing well right now. I'll let you know

if anything else comes up." Vincent killed the com link and took another few moments to settle down. Once he managed to not make a fist, he walked back inside, keeping his eyes on Cassie and pointedly ignoring Dulain.

Maybe we should've had Doctor Holland down here just in case. The physicians they brought from Earth were just as capable but Vincent felt more comfortable trusting one of their own. Helplessness gripped him but he remained near the door, waiting as patiently as he could. If they needed him, they undoubtedly would say so but he wasn't holding his breath.

***

Darren walked in on the security control station with a fire in his belly. He couldn't believe Heat would've dropped the ball on his duties so completely. The man was always so reliable but he missed a check-in and his deadline for going through the new passengers. He was about to get a serious ass chewing.

Heat slumped in his chair, seemingly asleep. Darren couldn't believe his eyes. Part of him wondered if it had been the injury but the doctors said it wasn't that bad anymore. They didn't even prescribe any pain medication. Yet there he was, dosing on duty. The surprise of it nearly knocked the wind from his irritable sails.

"Gunnery Sergeant!" Darren barked. "Get your sorry ass up this instant! What the hell do you think you're doing, sleeping on duty? I expect an explanation?"

When Heat didn't respond, alarm caught Darren almost as quickly as his anger had. He stepped closer, peering at the gunny's face. He seemed both relaxed and stiff at the same time, a combination that was horrible to behold. His left hand was held in a tight fist while the right seemed relaxed.

Darren tapped his com and established a connection with medical. "I need a team in security control stat. I have a man down. Seems to be … unconscious but I'm not sure from what. No notable injuries. Hurry." He checked Heat's pulse and breathed a sigh of relief when he

found it steady.
“Hang in there, Gunny. We’ll get you taken care of.” Darren hoped he had not experienced a seizure or something equally debilitating. That would be the end of his field career for sure and possible grounds for early retirement. A man like Heat would not be happy being forced to return to civilian life.

***

Heat hated rappelling. Early on in his career, he saw one of his unit fall to his death and another guy broke both legs when his rope broke. They used better material than before but it didn’t placate his fears. Every time he stepped off a ledge and leaned back, he swore he would fall and just as surely, when he touched the ground, he felt a profound sense of relief.
I’d rather jump out of an aircraft than this garbage. We should’ve used wing suits or parachutes.
Half way down, with the cool wind kissing his cheeks and biting through his clothes, Heat felt another wave of distraction hit him. He began thinking about Corporal Gorman. When he first saw him, his instinct was to call him Sergeant. Why? He wasn’t up for promotion for a while.
And what the hell is a Tol’An? Heat appreciated the distraction. It made it easier to climb, to ignore the fear in his gut and continue down without worrying about it. But even so, he found the thoughts in his head disturbing. They must’ve been the result of a dream, some kind of nightmare that stuck with him.
I don’t usually remember my dreams and certainly not to such an extent.
“Almost there,” Gorman’s voice piped through his ear piece. “We’ll scout the path and secure the area when we get down.”
“Good,” Heat replied. He didn’t bother to look down but he knew he was close. “I’m … not far behind. We’ll hook up in a minute.”
Cassandra Alexander. The name meant something to him but he couldn’t place from where. He thought she might’ve been an instructor for a training course or an administrator back at base but

why would it come up now? And how did she relate to this Tol'An business? Or the mission he was in the middle of?

I need to focus! I'm going to get myself and everyone on this mission killed if I don't.

But something warned him against casting aside the thoughts. Heat knew it wasn't safe but why, once again, eluded him. Some part of himself rebelled, shouting at him to *remember*. "Remember what?" He asked aloud, hoping it would somehow jar this hidden memory that was buried in his head.

"What?" Gorman asked. "What did you say, Heat?"

"Nothing," Heat grumbled. "Just … are you down there yet?"

"Yeah, we're on the ground. We're initiating our security sweep. See you in a minute."

Heat needed to keep it together until they finished their tasks. The last thing he needed was for the men to catch on to odd behavior. Infiltrating an enemy base held enough stress without their unit commander losing his shit. Heat had seen that before too and really had no desire to be the guy who did that to his men.

The wind picked up, making the rope bounce in Heat's hands. His left foot touched the ground and he breathed a sigh of relief, glad he'd made it just in time. Readying his weapon, he stepped away from the wall. Night vision made the area glow green. The facility was barely a mile and a half ahead.

Even with magnification, he didn't see any movement. Evans was on overwatch with his sniper rifle and he started painting targets. That would be the real deciding factor on how they went about the attack. Each time he identified one, it appeared in Heat's headset with a tiny red dot. Ten total were outside.

"That's not too bad," Gorman said. "Finishing our sweep … I wonder how many are inside."

Intel wasn't clear about their overall opposition which made the assignment crap. Satellite photography gave Heat the impression they might find a grand total of fifty men inside but that included technicians and scientists. Actual combatants might've topped out at thirty and that depended on how paranoid their opponents were.

After all, they'd setup base in the middle of the mountains with limited overland access. Air strikes were possible but these guys knew they had a valuable commodity. They were working on some seriously advanced weapons, the type no one should've had. The debate came down to whether they should blow them up or take them.

Heat's presence there proved what they decided. His orders were to take the research and data then destroy the facility to create confusion. Eventually, it would come out that the data was stolen but by then, the government would've replicated it and made it work. The marines weren't told what they were stealing but they knew it would be a game changer.

I guess we'll see about that.

The head scientist used to work at Gamma Alpha. He had access to the Orb and one day, he disappeared. Many thought he'd been kidnapped but later, intelligence confirmed he'd defected. The fringe faction offered a lot of money and the resources to do some unethical research.

Though he wasn't at the facility, he was marked for termination. Some other unit had to go kill him and Heat was grateful they hadn't been given that assignment. He didn't like the assassination tasks. They were always messy and he especially didn't like having to take out civilian targets.

That was a job for … well, he didn't know but as long as he didn't have to do it, he was happy.

"We're good," Gorman said. "No troops outside the base perimeter."

"You think they've got more of those bioengineered sensors you guys worried about?" Heat asked. "Or can we just go in there and get the job done?"

"Anderson checked. We're good."

"Hey." Heat turned to Anderson. "How the hell would you know anyway? You weren't entirely sure above."

Anderson shrugged. "There was something off about the path."

"Something off." Heat glared at him. "When we get back, we're going to have a talk about gut feelings and backing them up with something substantial." He shook his head. "Gorman, get us into position. Evans,

you're just about up. I hope you've prioritized your targets. I don't want some maniac with an RPG taking a potshot at me."
"Don't worry, Sarge," Evans said. "I doubt they'll waste good ordnance on you."
"You're a real joker." Heat sighed as they picked up the pace, moving toward the facility. The plan was to take position around the door. Anderson would creep up to get through the lock. When he was ready, Evans would start shooting. Then, marines would rush in and secure the courtyard. They had practiced the plan back at base dozens of times.
Unfortunately, their rehearsals didn't include the icy cold of a mountain night. Their targets wore thick garments, heavy coats that would likely hamper their movement if they needed to react quickly. Heat crouched behind a large boulder, watching a nearby target stare off into the distance.
They're exhausted, cold and bored of their assignments, Heat thought. *When this goes down, they won't be prepared.*
"I'm in position," Anderson muttered. "Beginning the hack now. Twenty seconds to go time."
Heat started counting the seconds in his head. Once again, thoughts tried to break through his concentration. *Cassandra Alexander. Darren Gabriel. Desmond Bradford. Vincent Bowman.* The names clicked by one after another, blurry faces accompanying each one. He *knew* them, as well as he knew his own name but only Gabriel made sense. Lieutenant Gabriel never commanded one of Heat's units but he'd seen him around the bases before. They were passing acquaintances at best but even that seemed wrong. Somehow, he knew him better than that … Somehow, they were close enough to have private conversations.
This literally makes zero sense! Frustration boiled to the surface of his mind as he tried to puzzle through the confusion. Evans voice brought him out of it. "Firing now."
Wait, what? Shit! Heat shook his head, getting back in the game. The whisper of the silenced rifle popped over their com net and one of the guards fell off the wall, landing near Anderson. Another shot killed the flanking soldier.

The doors opened. Heat called to the others, “Advance!”
The marines spilled out of cover and formed two lines. They broke left and right, drawing the attention of the remaining eight guards. Heat took aim and popped one in the head, red mist quickly evaporating behind him. Silenced weapons cracked all around him, bringing down the opposition before any of them could so much as lift their own guns.
That wasn’t as bad as I thought. “Good job,” Heat said, “secure the courtyard. Markel and Dahl, I want you on the doors to hold this place. The rest of you form up on me. We’re going to penetrate the base in thirty seconds.”
“On it,” Gorman said. “You heard the sergeant, make sure there aren’t any more of these jerks hiding out in here! Hurry it up! We don’t have all night!”
Heat moved over to the door and leaned against the wall. If they had cameras, they’d already know they were under attack. The marines were ready to go loud when they got inside. They might be outnumbered, but it wouldn’t matter when they got into the tight quarters. Besides, they weren’t dealing with seasoned soldiers. Just hired guns.
And they aren’t prepared. Heat’s head began to ache. The Gnosis came to mind … A spaceship that hopped all over the galaxy. Humans piloted it … He was on board but that didn’t make sense. Earth had yet to field such a vessel, let alone have it leave the solar system. What the hell was wrong with him?
I don’t have time for flights of fancy! Planets formed in his mind, images of space stations and distant fleets. He shook them off, staring at the door they were about to breach. *If I don’t pay attention, I’m going to get slaughtered on this mission. Come on, Heat! Knock it the hell off!*

***

Desmond rubbed his chin, contemplating the experiment. The fact it impacted multiple people worried him. The Orbs were already an unknown factor so nothing surprised him but the inexplicable

outcome needed a quick explanation. Were Gil and Cassie brain dead? Did the Orb have anything to do with their status?
Nothing else seemed likely but he didn't have the naivety to assume. They'd dealt with so many insidious threats, he couldn't put the situation past something like sabotage. Gil and Cassie represented two major advantages. If they were taken out of play that would seriously hamper their ability to solve the problem.
But why not Harper and Thayne? The latter is the foremost expert on Orb technology and the other's in charge. Desmond tried to put himself in the shoes of an insurgent and short of a Tol'An, he couldn't imagine why anyone would try to prevent their success. Especially a Pahxin or human. *This might be the only hope for both our cultures*.
"Captain," Salina's voice pulled him out of his reverie. "I … might have some bad news."
"I'd love to hear it." Desmond sighed, joining her at her station. "What've you got?"
"I was going over our communications logs and I found something odd. Just before we went into hyperspace, a message was sent out of our solar system."
"Pahxin?" Desmond asked. "Maybe they were just letting their people know we were on our way."
"It wasn't directed toward their home world and not where we're going either."
"Do you know what was said?"
Salina hummed. "It was a coded message. I'm working to break it now but the operator who sent it masked their identity. They even tried to erase this from the logs but I've got a triply redundant system in place to prevent such tampering."
"Thank God for your paranoia," Desmond replied. "How long before you know what they said?"
"Thirty minutes at the soonest." Salina looked up at him. "Cassie might've been able to break the code faster than me."
"What about Dawson?" Desmond asked. "She's supposed to be pretty good at her job."
Salina winced. "What if she's the one who sent it?"

“I sincerely doubt it, but I see your point.” Desmond patted her chair. “Do what you can and get back to me as soon as possible. Depending on what they got up to, we might need to be hunting them down before they cause any real trouble.” *They might have had something to do with what happened to Cassie and Gil.*

The thought made his stomach sink. He’d hoped getting them into hyperspace would be sufficient to keep them safe, at least until they emerged. The Gnosis just became a locked room mystery, one that was stuck in hyperspace for several more hours. Plenty of time for a clever saboteur to cause a lot of trouble.

***

Gil struggled with a sense of vertigo and illness. He found himself standing on the surface of a planet long declared to be off limits by his government. Travelers were warned about the violent weather and the strange mutants that ate outsiders just for visiting. Many such restrictions seemed ridiculous to him in the past. This one, he agreed with.

The flight down in the shuttle felt truncated and went by in a blur. Gil barely remembered boarding the vessel before it took off and deposited them on the surface. They parked it in the courtyard while everyone, including the pilot, departed to create a perimeter. Gil knew why they had to be so vigilant.

The facility they were about to penetrate had been a holy place, some kind of temple from the past. He figured the mutants still considered it sacred on some level and that meant desecration was met with extreme violence. Though honestly, he figured anytime someone ate a sentient being, the situation became extreme.

Quinda joined him on the search and didn’t seem to want to let Gil out of his sight. It felt like he might be a prisoner and he resolved to ask about it when they got inside, out of the light and the immediate threat of being shot or impaled by a spear. The doors were already taken out, crumbled from some kind of explosive.

What have they done here? Gil looked all around, noting that

everything but the entrance was immaculately clean. At some point in the past half hour, the Kalrawv Group blasted the door. If it had been any longer, the monsters would've been on them already. The urgency came from fear of what the beasts would do and how quickly they'd do it.

"Was this necessary?" Gil gestured to the rubble as they traversed it but Quinda didn't respond. Gil stopped and grabbed the man. "Answer the question. Why didn't you wait for me? We could've opened that gracefully. You risked angering the things that live here. Why? I want to know before we go in there."

"We agreed to your price, Quinda said. "Regardless of how unreasonable. What do you care how we got inside?"

"I care when my life is on the line," Gil replied. "I care when I might be *eaten* by the indigenous people."

Quinda sighed. "We were in a hurry, okay? Does that make you feel better? We were hoping for a simple smash and grab but it turned out to more complicated. You're here because we couldn't get what we needed fast. Now … are you satisfied? Do you want to waste more time because you seem to know these creatures will come for us?"

Gil wanted to decline, he wanted to get back on the shuttle and get the hell out of there but he knew the Kalrawv Group wouldn't take kindly to it. They were his ride, unfortunately, and that meant he needed to finish the job or he'd likely be stranded, if not outright shot. *Just my luck I'd be dragged into this kind of mess*.

He looked back at the shuttle, noting that it was one of their newer models. That meant hyperspace capable in a pinch. He put that information in the back of his mind and smiled at Quinda, nodding once. "Whatever you say, boss. Just lead the way." Extracting the data might take a while so further argument merely wasted time.

Quinda seemed relieved and he picked up the pace, practically jogging into the former temple and down a short hallway. They emerged into a stone room with a computer terminal. Two men toiled at it, the guys who couldn't figure it out. Gil wondered how they would feel about being replaced.

Relieved, probably. They wanted off that planet as much as anyone

and he didn't blame them. A storm would ground them indefinitely and the last survey of the planet suggested the monsters could travel in them. Shuttles would be useless and without protective gear, they'd be unable to leave the safety of the temple.

Gil approached and Quinda shooed the men away. They stepped back, exchanging grateful glances between themselves.

"Have you figured anything out?" Gil asked, peering at the screen. "Anything at all? Or have you simply wasted your time?"

They clearly didn't want to say they'd wasted their time, but he knew that was the truth when they hesitated. One of them stepped forward. "We did manage to get the device to turn on. It is a touch screen and when we ran our fingers across it, the thing came to life. And shortly after, we became stuck at a login screen."

Gil nodded. He wondered if that explanation was enough for Quinda to not give them a hard time but he doubted it. The man was a ruthless mercenary scum and he didn't have tolerance for failure. Their ineptitude required their main ship to leave the system to fetch someone else. That alone would earn them a serious reprimand.

I wonder what would've happened to me if we arrived and they'd figured it out. Gil knew the question was pointless. Chances of these fools opening any ancient technology rested firmly between zero and none. However, Quinda wasn't a man to waste a resource. He probably wouldn't have paid for the trip, but at least Gil assumed he'd survive.

"How long will it take?" Quinda asked.

"I've literally just started looking at it," Gil replied. "You're going to have to go away for a moment so I can work. I recommend setting up a defensive perimeter. Something that we can hold for a time if necessary. I'll get your precious data but you cannot hover here, giving me a hard time."

"Hurry." Quinda started to walk away and paused. "Do you need these two idiots? Will they help if they stay?"

"They can go," Gil replied. "Let them … do whatever they need to do."

"Come on," Quinda shouted. "I want you outside with your eyes on the horizon. If those monsters come, we need as much warning as

possible. We're counting on you, Gil. Don't waste our time!"
"Oh, I won't." Gil shook his head, relaxing into the work when he was finally alone. After fifteen years of excavating tombs and ruins across nearly a hundred worlds, he had amassed a wealth of data and applications to help break old codes. Any society that utilized the Trindisha technology could be hacked into with a universal language. The trick was figuring out the minor differences in whatever the dead culture used and building upon it until he was into their system. While he didn't consider the task difficult, it generally proved to be time consuming. Haste never happened and even trying for it merely made things take longer.
Gil allowed his tablet to begin scanning the terminal, finding a protocol which would allow it to access the data. That generally took up the majority of the time as depending on their interface method, whether it was archaic or ahead of its time, he needed to get his equipment on the same page.
Interface. The word conjured more strange images into his head, the things he chalked up to being drunk before. Now, he was sober and the people he thought were figments of his imagination came back to haunt him. Faces appeared in his mind's eye, those of colleagues he swore he'd never met.
Thayne Rindala had been his friend, so that part made sense but what did he have to do with these other people, this other species entirely? Cassandra Alexander? What kind of name was that? Or Geoff Heathrow … another odd sounding designation. Had he conjured up an image of some old data he found on another dead planet?
I don't think so. This feels fresh … new … and I don't understand it at all.
Quinda was shouting outside at his men. It made Gil shake his head. The fool would wake up the entire planet it if he could. That was one of the reasons that Gil hated working with amateurs and the mercenaries. They never had enough sense to be patient, to find places to work where they weren't going to be devoured by the locals.
He remembered one of his first assignments with the Kalrawv Group took him into a war zone. They had a habit of picking the most stressful environments imaginable. News agencies loved to talk about

their exploits and though few people knew what they were truly up to, it didn't stop the public from building some legends around their activities.

Even though people in the know fully understood they were criminals, fiends and opportunists.

That thought conjured up something else. *Tol'An*. Why did he care about that fringe faction? They weren't going to really be a problem, not to the rest of the galaxy. Once the Pahxin located their hidden base, they'd be wiped out and no one would remember them. What did they have to do with anything?

But his mind continued to hop back to them, as if trying to remind him that they were important. He'd encountered a couple of them in recent weeks. They were zealots, maniacs, idiots, killers … the types of people Gil ran into quite frequently in his current situation. They didn't care much about him, probably because he didn't appear to be capable of arming them.

They had something to do with Cassandra Alexander … with a ship called *Gnosis*. *Who cares?* The thought made Gil's head hurt. *Why should I be worrying about this right now? I'm a little busy! Am I truly this easily distracted? Quinda's going to kill me if I don't get this as quickly as possible!*

But the Kalrawv Group wasn't the problem. Not when compared to some nebulous threat working at the back of his mind. His tablet would take a while to get into the alien terminal. He needed to explore the strange thoughts causing him so much discomfort and determine their origin.

He would tell Quinda it was simply challenging if he asked. The man was too much of an idiot to know any better.

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Chapter 6

Cassie balled her fist and jabbed backward, into the face of her opponent, thumb leading the way. The first blow reflected off his cheek and he grunted but before he could move, she adjusted and hammered at him again. This time, she felt the give of an eye, the softness surrendering to her bony digit.

He cried out and his grip loosened. She yanked free of him and threw a back kick, connecting with his knee. It cracked from her attack, dropping him to the ground. She turned to face him, watching him nurse his eye while struggling to get back to his feet. He'd tried to choke her out, tried to break her neck.

Any sense of mercy or sympathy simply didn't exist.

"So I was weak, huh?" Cassie clenched her fists, a sense of rage washing over her. "Just give up? You son of a bitch!" She punched him with a right hook, hammering his cheek, with all the momentum she could muster. The blow dropped him and he didn't move. She still gave him a solid kick to the stomach, just to be sure. "Go to hell."

She rested on her palms on her knees, catching her breath for a moment while staring at the man. He had to be prepared for a trainee to hurt him, to do serious damage. Especially when he threw out the sort of demeaning nonsense he whispered in her ear. Considering the *do whatever it takes* mentality of the AIA, she doubted anyone would say anything.

Cassie composed herself before moving again, heading down the tunnel. Providing there were no other attackers, she would finish the course momentarily. Her mind drifted back to the thoughts that nearly cost her the course. The Gnosis and the name Vincent returned. Now that she wasn't in immediate danger, she wanted to understand them. *They can wait until I've finished … until they tell me I'm good*.

But they wouldn't let up and even as she exited the tunnel, she felt a sense of vertigo hit her. *Interface*. The word made her dizzy. Why did that in particular bother her? She couldn't move, couldn't take

another step. The finish line loomed ahead. Two hundred paces, maybe three hundred at the most but she remained fixed in place, struggling with her mind.

Did they give me a drug somehow? Was the tunnel full of gas? What the hell is this?

A scream behind her made her react, instinct kicking in. She dodged to the side as her earlier attacker threw himself at her, landing in a crouch nearby. His bloodshot eye was only half open and he clearly favored the knee she kicked. He still could be deadly though with greater upper body strength and a look that suggested he wanted to tear her apart.

"You already lost," Cassie said. "What're you doing?"

He grunted and lashed out, throwing a punch at her head, starting a wild melee.

Cassie blocked one strike, took another to the stomach and another to the cheek. Falling back, she fired off several blows of her own, two punches and a kick. He blocked some, took others and the fight continued, each combatant throwing everything they had into the brawl.

He tried to grapple her but she danced away, her mobility dramatically better than his. Drool coated his chin and he looked more like a wild animal than a human being. Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him, and she thought about simply wearing him down, letting him do the work for her.

But some part of her wanted to beat the shit out of him, teach him a lesson for what he did in the tunnel. Ego fought against practicality. The former won. She jabbed him in the face, dodged a counter attack. Another jab caught his nose, blood splattering his lips and chin. He kicked at her and she countered, stomping his knee with a kick of her own.

He cried out and fell to the ground, flailing to get a hold of her leg. Cassie dropped down low and caught his wrist, rolling forward on her shoulder. The motion caused his arm to circle and it snapped loudly, bringing a horrifying scream out of him. As she came back up into a crouch, she turned, noting he was writhing about, his face contorted

in agony.

It didn't stop him and he tried for her again. This time, Cassie pinned his good arm to the ground under a knee as she pummeled his face with her fists, striking him until her knuckles ached and her wrists were on fire. He'd stopped moving at some point, a limp pile of unconscious meat.

Climbing to her feet, Cassie felt every bruise and painful blow he'd visited on her. She shrugged them off and started back toward the finish line. If they wanted to see how far she'd go, if they needed to know whether she had it in her to do whatever it took for a mission, then they knew her limits.

The lesson, for what it was worth, seemed pointless to her. There were other ways that didn't involve a man being beaten half to death, better methods to test a person's loyalty. But for whatever reason, they willingly sacrificed an individual to see what would happen. He'd be in the hospital for weeks, if not months and may never walk right again.

I wonder who he was really.

Interface came back to plague her. As she approached the finish line, the world beyond it seemed to glow white. She approached an endless expanse of nothingness, the emptiness of forever. *This must be part of the test. Interface … a computer problem. A theoretical problem, some kind of augmented reality … I have to puzzle it out.*

But she didn't have a tablet, no weapons, no equipment at all to analyze what she saw. Staring into it, she slowed down and went through the thoughts she'd had in the tunnel, the small nuggets of information that threatened her chances for finishing the course. They had to be the pieces to solve the final riddle.

Vincent … Gnosis … Interface … Orb … Desmond … Tol'An …

Cassie tried to put them together but they didn't make any sense. Not without giving in to … to what? A hidden reserve of information? An implant? Something else? It was *right there* waiting to be remembered, a word on the tip of the tongue, a frustrating sense of reality desperately clawing to come out.

Think! Cassie slapped her forehead and closed her eyes. *Come on, girl!*

Think! This is not beyond you. Figure. It. Out.

***

"I don't know what's wrong with him," Doctor Holland said to Gabriel. "He's catatonic but there's brain activity. When did this happen anyway?"
Gabriel shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I went in to check on him because I was shocked he hadn't finished his task and … well … I found him like this. Do you think it has something to do with his injury? Some sort of reaction to it? Or maybe he's suffering from an infection?"
"No, there's no infection." Holland stared at his tablet for several moments. "I honestly haven't seen anything like this before. I can't say what's wrong with him. I don't even know what to try yet. We're going to have to run some blood work and tests. Hopefully, we'll discover exactly what put him in this state … then we can go about reversing it."
"Do whatever you have to, Doc." Gabriel's communicator buzzed and he stepped away to answer it. "Captain Gabriel here."
"Darren, it's Desmond. We've got a problem. Can you come to the bridge for a quick briefing?"
It had to be bad if he was being summoned up there. He'd only been up there three times and one of them was on a tour of the ship prior to taking the assignment. "I'll be right there. Do you want me to bring some security?"
"I've got two up here I trust," Desmond said. "I don't think we'll need more yet, but you can decide when you hear what I've got to say. Better hurry."
"I'm on my way." Gabriel turned to Holland. "Thank you for your help, Doctor. I appreciate it."
"He's in good hands, Captain. Don't worry."
But Gabriel knew he would. As he went down the hall to the elevator, he thought back to the various men under his command who had suffered different injuries and death. He took them all personal, every

single time. He made it a point of honor to deliver notices to the families of those men who lost their lives under his command as well. The responsibility was one he took very seriously.

Nevertheless, whatever happened to Heat didn't seem to be combat related. Perhaps he had some kind of stroke or suffered from an old injury. Holland would figure it out, but would it be too late to do anything about it? Heat was one of the toughest men he'd ever met but the guy had been through a lot in the past few weeks.

After being involved in every away mission the Gnosis conducted, he'd been injured at least three times. He'd lost friends, killed more men than some people did during an entire tour and visited alien ruins and planets in several different systems. He could've caught anything during those operations.

It was a miracle he hadn't suffered something else sooner.

Gabriel stepped onto the bridge and Desmond immediately took him aside to the captain's antechamber. There, they closed the door.

"Salina found a suspicious communication sent just before we went into hyperspace," Desmond explained. "She's been working to decode it but our database shows that they sent it to a section of space where there's been known Tol'An activity. Chances are very good we have a traitor on board."

"Fantastic." Gabriel slapped the wall. "How the hell did they pass our vetting? We were so thorough!"

"Were we?" Desmond asked. "Salina said that Heat didn't finish his sweep of the people on the shuttles."

"No, he got sick." Gabriel's eyes narrowed. "Or he was attacked." He pulled out his tablet and brought up the camera feed. The two men watched as Heat merely went stiff and collapsed in his chair. "Okay, so if someone *did* do something, it was with gas. And they might've attacked him to keep their secret."

"Very true," Desmond agreed. "Either way, I need you to pull together some men who you can trust and find our traitor as soon as possible. Before we leave hyperspace."

"Because he can't escape right now, is that it?"

Desmond nodded. "Exactly and the last thing we need is this guy

getting away to cause more trouble elsewhere. Hell, I want him to be an example to others that betraying our two cultures will not be tolerated. However, we also have to think that if they work for the Tol'An, they might be willing to sabotage us while we're in hyperspace … maybe even destroy the ship."
"That would be insanity," Gabriel said. "Not only would they die, but they'd lose access to two Orbs. What would be the point?"
"Take two out of the equation," Desmond replied, "there are four left. They have two already, they might know where the others are *and* they would destroy our ship and take away one of humanity's only advantages against them. Blowing us up has a pretty win-win outcome for the terrorists."
"I don't like how your mind works," Gabriel frowned. "But I get it and it makes sense. We'll get on it right now, but the crew isn't going to like it. I'll have to take some people into the lab they're running their experiments in. The bastard might even be down there, waiting to hurt someone."
"They've had some luck with Cassie, but Gil went under too." Desmond shrugged. "I'm not sure what's happening right now but Vincent promised me a report soon. Either way, do what you have to do and keep me informed. If you need help, I'll step in. Otherwise, stamp this asshole out fast."
"You've got it, sir." Gabriel nodded and left the bridge, fuming at the idea of someone actively working against them on board. After all their precautions and work, they still managed to sneak someone in their midst. When the criminal was found, he knew it would be hard not to let his men give them a severe beating.
Gabriel doubted he would stop them either.

***

Vincent couldn't stop checking the time on his tablet. Every minute felt like an eternity while Gil and Cassie were effectively unconscious. Especially when the doctors didn't know what was going on. Their efforts failed to deliver any results. Not only were the patients in

danger but the mission suffered as well.

I have to be honest with myself. I don't care about the operation right now. My sole concern is Cassandra and whether or not she's okay. He wouldn't admit it to anyone else but that was the truth. It took every ounce of will not to be by her side, to stand stoic at the door and act as an observer.

Vincent knew there were cards to play. He could demand information from Harper, even using the captain's name if necessary. Distracting them would merely delay their progress, what little of it they made. So he waited, taking a deep breath while watching reports come in from different parts of the ship.

Darren Gabriel entered the room suddenly, startling Vincent.

"Commander, I need a word with you in the hall."

Vincent sighed and joined him. "What is it, Darren?"

Gabriel related to him the story about the traitor and let him know they needed to check everyone in the lab area. He also mentioned Heat being downed and in the hospital which especially struck Vincent as odd. That man might've been the toughest guy he'd ever met. Who could've snuck up on him, let alone taken him down?

"I'll do what I can from here," Vincent said. "Cassie and Gil are both under right now and all the researchers are pretty intent on figuring out what happened. I doubt they're involved but if so, they're about the most subtle people I've ever seen in my entire life. And don't forget that Beaumont Dulain is in there as well."

"Nevertheless, the captain wants them stamped out quickly so no one gets a pass."

"I get it." Vincent nodded. He paused. "Wait, what do you mean by that?"

"I'm vetting everyone." Gabriel looked him in the eyes, making it quite clear he meant *everyone*.

"You're questioning *my* loyalty right now?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No, I'm being thorough in my duty. That doesn't mean I'm blaming anyone or placing guilt. It does mean that when I have to check the entire crew, I start with the first officer. That way, you can help me do this work and I can testify without a doubt

in my mind that you were just as diligent as I was."
The whole thing was insulting but Vincent couldn't fault him or the logic. "Okay, so what do I have to do?"
"Put your hand on the scanner." Gabriel revealed his tablet and held it out. Vincent placed his palm on the screen. "Are you in any way trying to sabotage the Gnosis?"
"No." Vincent replied.
"Are you committing treason to this ship and the commanding officers?"
"No."
"Do you have any intention of delaying this mission or causing it to fail?"
"No."
"You check out." Gabriel stepped back. "Thank you and I'm sorry."
"Don't be." Vincent looked back in the lab. "You're not going to be able to ask some of them … and I assume you think that Cassie and Gil might be traitors too?"
"I don't think any specific person is," Gabriel replied. "I just know someone is but who, I'm leaving up to the investigation. Anyway, I'm not sure how to scan a Pahxin to find out if they're lying so that will be a challenge to overcome. Can you take care of the humans in here? There are two guards standing by in case someone makes a break for it."
"Yes, I'm on it." Vincent couldn't wait to put the question to Dulain. He grabbed Gabriel's arm before he could walk away. "Be careful when you leave this area. If you end up finding this person, they won't likely go down without a fight."
Gabriel grinned and it did not look pleasant. "Oh, commander … I'm counting on it."
"That's not at all chilling," Vincent replied. "Good luck. I'll let you know the results of my scans as soon as they're done."
"Keep everyone down here." Gabriel walked to the elevator. "We'll hook up again in half an hour."
Looking forward to it, Vincent thought, turning back to the room. *Now to bring their ire to bear on me as I interrupt their work. This will be swell.*

Can't wait to hear Harper complain. Or Dulain.

***

Heat's ears rang as unsuppressed shots discharged in the confined space of the facility. Shouts tried to compete, the enemy attempting to communicate with one another, but they couldn't possibly make out their own gibberish. The marines managed to get down the stairs and into a pair of storage rooms where they dug in and fired through the door.

The enemy took position in an open area not even twenty feet away. They maintained reasonable cover, leaning their weapons around to lay down a constant barrage of suppressive fire. While they might not have been able to hit any of Heat's men, they certainly weren't going to end the conflict in such a manner.

They're buying time. Heat figured they must've been hoping for reinforcements to come and rescue them. Haste was in order and his men needed to clear out the enemy position so they could get to their objective and leave. None of the marines wore any insignias or specific uniforms, leaving it a mystery who might be attacking them. Which was the idea from command's perspective.

"Give them some grenades," Heat said. "Time them out. Toss two, count three then two more. Go."

The marines cooked some explosives and tossed them down the hall, causing a whole new kind of panic and disarray. Gunfire stopped as people scrambled around just moments before the first set of explosives. A man began hollering, crying out in pure agony. Someone rushed to his aid just as the next set of grenades went into the room. When they exploded this time, the screaming went silent and a meaty sound slapped the wall.

"We've got movement out here," Evans said. "Two soldiers must've been on patrol. They're coming back toward the compound at the ready."

"Take them out," Heat said. "Don't let them get to the doors."

"On it." Evans paused for a moment. "They're down."

“Gorman,” Heat said, turning to the corporal. “We need to see who’s left in there.”
“Okay.” Gorman stepped into the hall and Heat’s jaw dropped.
“Anyone still alive in there?” He paced to the edge of the hall and peeked in. A gun went off and he ducked back, then returned fire. Someone grunted. “Clear.”
“Jesus Christ!” Heat hurried over to him. “I didn’t mean for you to walk out here and tempt them with your face.”
Gorman shrugged. “They were so enthusiastic before the grenades, I figured they must’ve either fled or died. That guy I just shot was missing his leg.”
The room looked like a charnel house. Body parts lay scattered against the walls and blood coated the floor. The close proximity meant the only ones who lived would’ve had to make it to the opposite hallway and it didn’t seem like they stopped when they got there. Whatever defenders remained, they were deeper inside.
“Okay, keep moving.” Heat gestured. “According to the schematics, we’ll be passing through some living quarters before reaching the labs. Keep sharp in the event someone’s hiding out in there. Let’s form up with two people watching our backs. Anderson and Revel, you guys are volunteered.”
“Thanks, Sarge,” Anderson muttered.
“Better than being in front.” Heat patted Gorman’s shoulder. “Since you’re so confident, you can take point.”
“Might as well. No one else is going to get it done.” Gorman grinned as he headed down the hall, aiming his weapon as he went. The others fell in behind him with Heat standing just to the left. This gave him a good view and a decent firing angle. “I know, I know. I’ll stay to the right.”
“You read my mind, man.”
“It’s like a kid’s book, so not entirely difficult.”
“Wow.” Heat shook his head. “Can we pretend we’re on a mission for a few minutes?”
“I heard movement,” Anderson said. “Up ahead of you guys.”
“How the hell can you hear anything?” Revel asked. “My ears feel like

someone put a full marching band in my head and wound them up for go."
"I plugged my ears," Anderson replied. "And I definitely heard something."
"Yeah, well," Gorman said, "they aren't coming out to introduce themselves. Wait …" He aimed and fired, causing a yelp down the hall. "I stand corrected."
Heat squinted into his night vision and barely saw a form writhe on the ground before going still. "Good eyes. Damn."
"Meh." Gorman continued on, holding his rifle up to his shoulder. They passed by a series of doors, each supposedly leading to living quarters. Gorman paused at the end, crouching by the body and checking the pulse. He shook his head, scanned the area and moved into the room.
People had been there recently. Cards occupied a table and someone's smoldering cigar remained behind. Heat directed the men to cover the four exits and put Anderson and Revel on the hallway they'd just come from. "If anyone comes out of those quarters, take them out. We don't need someone coming up on our rear."
Gorman leaned against the wall near one of the exits and drew out his tablet, checking the schematics. Heat joined him. The lab was less than a hundred yards away. It took up two stories so when they entered, they'd be up above on a catwalk and have to make their way down to the terminals.
An elevator on the far east side of the base allowed access but it was security coded to DNA apparently. Only a researcher had access to it. Heat knew that there were more guards somewhere in the base. They didn't want to mess with the marines but they had to be regrouping for a push.
"Evans," Heat spoke into his com, "how're things looking out there?"
"Boring," Evans replied. "Place is quiet and I've got nothing for miles. You're still clean. I assume you were worried about incoming air transport or something?"
"Exactly."
"Nothing. If they called for help, their backup won't be here in a

hurry."
Heat turned to Gorman and gestured toward the door. "It's the last push." His head began to ache as he considered what they would find, the computers and devices they would be hacking into. Anderson could handle it and the guards hadn't proven to be much of a threat so he didn't know why stress impacted him so badly.
He hadn't been nervous about a mission in years. What about this hit him so hard? *Interface. Vincent. Bradford. Gabriel. Cassandra. Orb.* The words danced through his mind, flying by like he was reading subtitles over his own thoughts. They kept jumping to the forefront, causing his vision to blur.
"You okay?" Gorman asked. "You look like shit."
"Thanks …" Heat grunted, pressing his left hand against the side of his head. "I've got one hell of a head ache, man. This is bad … Holy shit, it's bad."
"Revel, get over here," Gorman said. "Check him out."
"I'm good …" Heat muttered. "I'm … I should be fine …"
"Like hell." Gorman forced Heat to look him in the eyes. "Did you get hit in the head? Do you think he might be concussed?"
"The gunfire maybe." Revel pulled out a scanner and ran it over Heat. "I don't see any abnormalities. Not even inflammation. According to this, you shouldn't be in pain sir."
Gorman smirked. "You hear that, Heat? It's mental."
"Screw you." Heat shook his head, trying to cast off the pain. It took a few moments for his vision to clear and a moment later, he felt discomfort rather than agony. "Christ … I don't know what the hell happened but that was bad. Maybe I'm allergic to that shitty cigar over there.
"Want me to put it out?" Revel asked.
"Okay, enough with the jokes." Heat gestured to the door. "I want that data so we can get the hell out of here. Gorman's on point again."
"Yeah, send the guy who isn't wincing like a baby." Gorman smiled but it was obvious he was worried. Heat couldn't blame him, he was feeling some pretty serious anxiety over his sudden head problems too. The words remained in the back of his mind, constantly

threatening to come to the forefront.

Hold it together for another half hour, man! You're almost done!

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Chapter 7

Gil leaned against the pillar and closed his eyes, forcing himself to relax. His mind wandered freely, drifting toward the concepts that he seemed so desperate to explore. He fixated first on the word *Gnosis*, which was not in the Pahxin vocabulary nor any other he'd seen from all his exploration of ancient worlds.

Where did it come from? Gil asked the question as if querying his brain, treating it like a computer program. *What does it mean?*

The response came immediately, a thought popping before him with the same alacrity of a terminal. *Gnosis means 'knowledge'. It comes from the Greek people of Earth in the Sol system. It is the name of a starship of human origin.*

Gil never heard of such a place or a population. How had it come to his head now? And why? He tried another question. *Does this have to do with the terminal I'm attempting to access on this planet?*

Again, the answer came immediately. *Negative. This is information you already possess*.

"I'm not sure I like this newfound ability to chat with myself," Gil muttered aloud. *Who or what is Cassandra Alexander?*

A senior agent for the Applied Intelligence Association of Earth. She has worked on Trindisha technology, what they call Orbs.

"Trindishas … These humans have one?" Gil frowned as his tablet began to beep. He'd gained access to the terminal. It was time to start finding the data Quinda was so desperate for. It meant putting aside his queries for a moment but at least he had a solid start. What it meant might take a while longer to discover.

Perhaps humanity visited this world at some point and left behind traces that I'm picking up but I feel as if I know this Cassandra person. I wonder what Thayne has to do with it. Another answer popped into his head. *Doctor Rindala was rescued by the humans from Tol'An hands. He is how you became connected to the Gnosis*.

Gil thought of more questions but they left the moment he saw what the Kalrawv Group was after. The culture of that world had developed

a highly volatile form of energy, a generator that produced considerable power but they couldn't contain it. *Looks an awful lot like a bomb to me*. And that's precisely what these mercenaries wanted. They certainly weren't looking to improve upon the design and offer it up to the colonies who needed it or even Pahxin developers who might employ it on the home world. No, they were dealing in weapons again and this one would be perfect. An orbital strike with a large enough concentration might even devastate an entire city.

Damn it, Quinda. Why? Gil looked around, feeling frustrated and trapped by the situation. He couldn't give them the formula, that was certain but getting out of there … that was another situation entirely. If he didn't produce what they wanted, he would be killed. But something dawned on him.

How do they even know what they have?

Their buffoons couldn't get into the terminal so they couldn't have possibly known. Then it made sense. If they scanned the planet and did some decent surveys, which they had people for, they knew what devastated the different parts of the planet. The original fools who inhabited the place must've tried to use their invention.

The Kalrawv Group then narrowed down the possible places where data would be stored and settled on one of the only facilities left standing on the planet's surface. And there they were, in the temple where Pahxin eating monsters often roamed. *Just absolutely perfect. This was not worth the fee they agreed to*.

But the fact they willingly paid it made sense.

This has happened before. Gil's thought gave him a sense of déjà vu, a moment that made him feel sick to his stomach. He had to lean against the pillar to fend it off. *You have done this before. This is a memory. A dream. Some kind of simulation of your past as you bridge the interface*.

"Interface what?" Gil asked aloud. "What could possibly cause such a lucid and vivid world? A memory … There's no way. How is this possible?"

"How's what possible?" Quinda asked. The voice startled Gil and he nearly jumped out of his skin. "What's your progress?"

“I’m still trying to break their interface,” Gil lied. “And I thought I told you to be patient. When I’ve got the information, I’ll come find you.”
“We’re running out of time here. Scans are picking up a massive storm and I’ve got reports of native activity to the north and south. They’ve seen our shuttles and aren’t happy about the interruption.”
“I’m faster than anyone you could find on the market,” Gil said. “You know full well I don’t want to be here. I made it quite clear so I *am* hurrying!”
“Don’t think I trust you,” Quinda said as he paced away. “You may be the best archaeologist out there but the reason we come to you is because you’re incapable of holding down a real position. Everyone knows you’re a thief, liar and addict. Nothing would make me happier than never seeing you again.”
“If it helps, the feeling is mutual,” Gil called after him. His mind raced through his options of how to escape. The shuttle contained a hyperspace module. If he got it off the ground, he could get away but there was another ship flying around out there. Taking care of that would be the trick.
The storm might be used to my advantage. Gil considered the possibility. If he locked down the terminal, ensured that no one could access the data without him, he’d preserve the data *and* get off the planet. He could then flee back to the station where he might find some help dealing with Kalrawv. *Unless Quinda doesn’t make it off this planet.*
He couldn’t do anything about the ship in orbit but if they lost their expedition, they might forget about him. Then he could go back to his life without worrying about the threat they represented. He might not have to deal with them again. Though the financial impact didn’t make him happy, they were miserable clients.
I just need a weapon and I can get out of here. Those buffoons who were on the terminal earlier could help. They were both armed and if he called for their assistance, they’d be distracted with the terminal. He could then take them out, hijack the shuttle and flee but it required solid timing.
Checking his tablet, he set a timer for when the storm would arrive. Between that and the natives, he was looking at a reasonable getaway

strategy. Risky, but possible. He'd been through far tighter spots in his life and this one in particular might not even be the worst of them. *Then I can figure out all this Gnosis nonsense*.

***

"Commander Bowman is checking the people in the lab," Gabriel reported to Desmond on a secure channel from his office. "My people are going over the others right now. We're limiting the scope of the breach rapidly and the good news is no one's tried to access any unauthorized areas."
"I'm glad to hear that at least," Desmond said. "Salina still hasn't managed to decode the message. I'm guessing it'll be too late by the time she does though."
"May I be of assistance?" The woman's voice made Gabriel spin in place, drawing his pistol. Before it could be brought to bear, a hand caught his hand and kept the weapon pointed at the wall. Christina Dawson tilted her head as he scowled at her. "My, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I approached you."
"How'd you sneak in here?" Gabriel asked. "This is my private office … and it was locked."
"Was it?" Christina shrugged. "I'm an agent with the AIA and I believe you're looking for a traitor. I take that personally considering how much work Cassie and I did to ensure this didn't happen. I'd like to help and I want in now so give me what you've got. Otherwise, I have to open my own investigation, which would be kind of a waste of time if you think about it."
"You have no authority on this ship," Gabriel replied. "I'm the head of security here and I don't answer to you."
"Then ask your captain." Christina stepped back. "But be quick about it. As you just said, we're probably running out of time."
"What's going on?" Desmond asked.
"Agent Dawson is here and would like to help." Gabriel kept it short and simple. "I'd like to bring her up to speed and employ her services if you don't mind."

“It’s your investigation,” Desmond said. “Get back to me if you find anything. We’ve locked down the bridge for now and Engineering is in the same boat. Good luck.”
Gabriel tossed the communicator on the desk and turned to Christina. “Alright, Secret Agent, what exactly do you have and how can you help? I’d like a good reason why I shouldn’t have you tossed in the brig and especially why I just made the captain think your involvement was my idea.”
Christina smirked. “Nice. I’m glad to see we’re all on the same team here. Anyway, what’ve you done to vet these people so far? How many are left?”
“One of my men was going through their records when they all came on board but he was injured and couldn’t finish. We had a redundant technician doing it as well. They didn’t find any discrepancies. I personally vetted Commander Bowman who is going to check all the people in the research lab. Your boss is in there too, if you don’t already know.”
“Yes, and I’m at least eighty percent certain that Dulain isn’t a traitor,” Christina said. Gabriel scowled at her, drawing an eye roll. “I was kidding. Anyway, sorry. I won’t be funny again. Did you use the scanner to tell if they were lying? That’s how you vetted people, right? Or did you have something more sophisticated?”
“Just the scanner,” Gabriel replied. “And what’s more sophisticated?”
“I’ve got some tools.” Christina smiled. “Okay, keep doing what you’re doing. Maintain lockdowns on all major systems and stations. I’ll be back as soon as I can with news. Oh …” She approached and gestured to his tablet. “Shall we vet me really fast? Just in case I’m such a brazen idiot as to come in here before causing trouble?”
Gabriel asked her the same questions as Vincent and she passed the test.
“There you go.” Christina frowned. “Tell me, how did your man become injured?”
“The doctor doesn’t know,” Gabriel replied. “It could’ve been an attack, but he was out. Apparently, there’s brain activity and such.”
Christina tilted her head. “And when exactly did it happen?”

“I can’t say for sure. I wasn’t with him.”
“Around the time of the experiment?”
“I found him after they initiated it.” Gabriel took a step forward.
“Why?”
“Because that’s what happened to Agent Alexander and Gil Vaedra.”
Christina tapped her leg. “I wonder if he was effected as well. Hell, I wonder if anyone else might’ve been. We have two tasks we need to accomplish now. I’ll work on the traitor angle but I need you to have some of your men check everyone else.”
“For what?”
“Catatonia, like your friend.” Christina shrugged. “This might have to do with the Orb and if so, we need to let Doctor Harper and her people know right away. In fact, I’d bring your soldier down to the research lab. They can probably do more for him than your doctor. If I were a betting woman, I’d say he needs to be with the others to finish the experiment.”
“I’d like to know how he got involved in it at all. He wasn’t anywhere near them.”
Christina backed toward the door. “Alien technology so far beyond the realm of our understanding, it’s insane likely doesn’t adhere to our sense of what makes sense. That’s why I decided to just be an intelligence agent. So much easier than playing with all those strange devices all day long. Ciao for now.”
Gabriel watched as the door closed behind her, shaking his head. *I really hate the AIA sometimes*. He got on his com and connected with several of the marines throughout the ship, putting them to the task of searching the ship for anyone that might’ve passed out alone. Thinking about other crewmen who hadn’t been discovered annoyed him.
At least we know it’s a possibility. And they’ll be found soon. Gabriel hesitated to give in to a sense of relief about Heat but the possibility that they knew what was wrong with him meant there was hope for recovery. *Hang in there man, and wherever you are, I hope you’re with Agent Alexander and the Pahxin guy. If that’s even possible*.

***

Dulain watched Commander Bowman leave with the marine captain. He figured their little confab had something to do with security. Perhaps one of the people they brought with them proved to be a traitor after all. Considering all the work Christina and Cassie did, he would've been surprised but it wasn't impossible.

When Bowman came back in and started scanning the technicians for lies, his suspicion was confirmed. *Okay then, he's going to enjoy doing that with me*. Dulain couldn't help but give the man a hard time. He was far too earnest for his own good, too much of a boy scout. The fact Cassie might've fallen for it didn't shock Dulain but it did annoy him.

His agents should've been above such things. *Unless I was right and she's just using the hell out of him*.

Doctor Harper raised quite the stink about being questioned but she ultimately compiled, albeit with a lot of high minded complaints like *this is highly irregular* and *how dare you question my loyalty*. Truth be told, she was in an incredible position to cause trouble and it was a good call to check her.

Bowman approached Dulain and paused a good ten feet away. "Can you come out into the hall with me for a few moments please?"

Perhaps he hopes I'm the traitor so he can do something violent. I wouldn't be surprised. I probably shouldn't have given him such a hard time.

"Is there something wrong?" Dulain asked, adopting his best innocent tone. Bowman didn't speak. They left the room and the door shut behind them. "Really, Commander, we're in the middle of an experiment. I watched what you did to the others so I'm not entirely sure why I had to be separated from them."

"Because providing you check out," Bowman said, "I would like to fill you in on what's happening. You know, in the spirit of cooperation and the fact that your organization deals with this kind of crap. That is, of course, unless you'd like me to ask you the questions so you can return to sitting on your ass in there. Sir."

Maybe you're not the Boy Scout I thought after all. Dulain smiled and

nodded. “Understood, Commander. Please, ask your questions.”
“Hand on the scanner, please.” Bowman gave him a moment to comply then launched into the questions. “Are you in any way trying to sabotage the Gnosis?”
“No.”
“Are you committing treason to your country, this ship, humanity and or the commanding officers aboard?”
“I am not.”
“Yes, or no, please,” Bowman said.
“Sorry. No.”
Bowman sighed and repeated the question.
“No.”
“Do you have any intention of delaying this mission or causing it to fail?”
“No.”
Bowman looked ready to ask additional questions but he would be stepping outside the bounds of his authority. “Are we done then?” Dulain prompted. “Are you ready to tell me what’s going on? Bring me up to speed on this little plot we’re worrying about? I’m assuming you’ve already got Christina working on this with you.”
“I don’t know about that,” Bowman said. “But I will tell you what’s going on.” He filled him in on their efforts and what they had discovered that set off the witch hunt.
Dulain let out a sigh. “That means our enemies likely know the coordinates to where we’re going.” He rubbed his eyes. “I hope to God those Pahxin are ready for a fight out there and can hold them off until we arrive … Not that we’ll be a whole lot of help against an armada. If the Tol’An can field such a force, they would be fools not to over this.”
“How many ships did the Pahxin send?”
“I don’t know.” Dulain shrugged. “Everyone was playing things extremely close to the chest, I’m afraid. We know there are ships, we know that the Stalwart is in charge and that they will secure the system but beyond that, we’re in the dark. And of course, we don’t have our own fleet to escort us so …”

“Yeah, I understand your meaning.” Bowman shook his head. “But we can’t do anything about that right now. We have to find this person in case they plan to cause more trouble.”
“If they didn’t already.” Dulain gestured over his shoulder. “Those people in there may have succumbed to something other than the experiment. If our saboteur decided to disrupt the experiment that is.”
“Christ.” Bowman’s eyes widened in alarm. “How do we wake them up? Shouldn’t we try to wake them up?”
“Without knowing why they’re asleep, we’d be doing a lot more harm than good, I’m afraid.” Dulain shook his head. “No, Harper and her people are in control there. We need to focus on this security problem.”
“We don’t know how to scan the Pahxin.”
“What about that Thayne Rindala man? Can we trust him?”
Bowman hesitated. “I want to say yes … but in the case of security, I’m required to be paranoid. I mean, we *did* rescue him from the Tol’An. It is theoretically possible that he was working *with* them and has been duping us all along … though I’m guessing the Pahxin vetted him before the mission started.”
“They did. They checked all their people before they boarded but I’m going to tell you, whoever is behind this is unlikely to be a human.”
“Why?” Bowman asked.
“How would they know how to contact the Tol’An? Only your people onboard would have the slightest clue about them and even then, I would hesitate to believe that any member of this crew has their frequency.” Dulain shook his head. “No, this is a Pahxin matter. I’m sure of it.”
“If you’re right, it won’t be hard to narrow down the culprit,” Bowman said. “There aren’t that many on board. If we isolate the ones that aren’t actively busy, we should be good to go.”
“Find out who’s missing and track them down.” Dulain shrugged. “If Dawson’s involved, I’m sure that’s what she’s doing. You should find that out first. I’ll communicate with the captain and see if I can’t lend a hand at trying to crack that code. I haven’t done it in a few years, but I still have some tricks up my sleeve.”

“Okay …” Bowman turned to leave and paused. “Thank you, Mister Dulain. I appreciate the help.”
“I bet that hurt to say.”
Bowman lifted a shoulder. “Only a little.”
Dulain watched him go and pulled out his communicator, dialing in the bridge. “Captain Bradford, I believe you might need some help with a coded message. Mind if I hop up there and take a look? I know you’re locked down and all, but I’m unarmed and your Commander Bowman just vetted me.”
“Come on up, Mister Dulain.” He noted the Captain’s brief hesitation to extend the invitation. “I welcome the help at this point.”
Not really you don’t. Dulain smiled. “Very good. Be right there.”

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Heat fired his weapon, dodging into the hallway as he narrowly avoided a full burst that tapped the metal wall inches from his head. Revel took two shots to the shoulder and had fallen back down the hall. Gorman received a graze but wouldn’t talk about whether it was bad or not.
By contrast, they’d already killed twelve of the opposition guards but there were a lot more waiting for them than they anticipated. Even with grenades, they were in for a bit of a brawl. There wasn’t time for it, hence the risks they took and the men being shot. Plus, there was no way to go around.
*This feels wrong … this …*Heat closed his eyes. The sound of gunfire deadened, turning almost silent. He felt himself drifting, as if falling unconscious. *Have I been hit? Am I dying?* But he knew better. Something about the situation suddenly seemed familiar, as if he was experiencing a profound sense of déjà vu.
A man is about to walk around the corner. Heat lowered his rifle and drew his pistol, aiming high. Sure enough, one of the soldiers burst through but before he could fire his weapon, Heat pulled the trigger, putting a round through his head. Brain matter splattered the wall and the corpse hit the ground.

How the hell did I know that? Something else struck him. He knew there was a canister of compressed oxygen near a cluster of the guards. In his mind's eye, he could see it and he somehow recalled being frustrated when they encountered it before. *I said it would've been useful to know about …*

Heat lifted his rifle and popped around the corner, snapping a shot off before sliding back into cover. Gorman shouted at him, asking if he was insane but he didn't get the question off before the canister exploded. People started screaming as something else blew up. The chain reaction lasted a good thirty seconds before it calmed down.

A few more gunshots went off but not nearly to the extent they dealt with before. Gorman risked a glance, turning to the others. "We've got maybe six left down there!"

"I've got this!" Revel cried out, moving forward. He was wounded but still maintained excellent accuracy. Moving onto the catwalk, he returned fire on the forces below, blasting away to buy them all a chance to charge. Cover was sparse but Heat remembered where several sturdy terminals were just at the bottom of the stairs.

"Hang a hard right when you get down!" Heat shouted. "Take cover there and finish them off!"

He wanted to join them but he didn't know if he could. Moving felt strange, thinking in the present became hard. The past continued to plague him and then it dawned on him. Even as he looked around the corner and fired his rifle seemingly in slow motion … as the bullet struck his target and scattered blood all over the wall … he'd lived this before.

I've been here before, done all of this before. Heat looked over at Gorman, charging down the stairs with the other. His best friend, a sergeant on the Gnosis. Dead on their last mission. The others, Revel and Anderson were both gone as well, having died in another operation on a different continent.

I'm not here. Heat leaned against the wall and noted that the hallway took on a bright hue as if a powerful spotlight were shining on him. He couldn't make out any details, just an endless expanse of white.

That must be why I'm here. Some kind of interface. That word again. Did I

get sucked into the experiment?

Everything washed over him. The Gnosis. The trip through hyperspace. The need to find the other Orbs. All of it hit him like a splash of water right in the face. But what was he supposed to do about it? *I'm not a scientist. I don't know this shit half as well as Agent Alexander. How am I supposed to make this work?*

For whatever reason, he was there, reliving an old mission. There had to be a reason, a lesson to be learned or a piece of a puzzle to unravel. He wasn't the best at these types of things. There was a reason he'd joined the marines and stuck with infantry for so long. He was a fighter, first and foremost.

Hell, to the core. I'm not much of anything else if I'm to be honest. Yet here I am, playing around with alien tech. Captain Gabriel's going to kill me.

Something told him the light held the answers, but he needed the bravery to step inside. *Typically, we reserve this analogy for death. I hope the Orb knows what it's doing. This is straight insane*.

Heat took a deep breath and stepped forward.

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Chapter 8

Desmond hoped that Dulain could truly help them find the traitor but he didn't have a lot of faith. They had several hours to go before they'd arrive at their destination and that was long enough for the person to cause real trouble if they couldn't find them. With Dawson and Gabriel on it, he had some faith but the Gnosis was a big ship. Big enough to get intentionally lost in for a while.

Zach cursed and spun in his seat. "Captain, we have a problem."

"Must be something big," Desmond replied. "What's going on?"

"I … I'm not entirely sure how to explain this … or how it's even possible. But we're much closer to our destination than we should be."

Zach looked back at his terminal. "I was just doing my time check and instead of having seventeen hours before we arrive, we're down to only two."

"Um … That's not good." Desmond stepped closer to look at the report, as if he could see something Zach didn't. He confirmed the numbers and shook his head. "I don't know if we're going to have enough time for the experiment to conclude if that's true. Salina? Do you have any idea what happened?"

Salina checked something on her terminal and shook her head. "I believe someone optimized our course prior to engaging the hyperdrive. They ensured we would not be under for as long as we intended to be."

"That's how they sabotaged us." Desmond ran his hand through his hair. "I wonder if the Stalwart will even be there when we arrive. There's a chance they won't be. We could be running headlong into a trap all by ourselves. And if that's the case … Jesus."

Dulain stepped onto the bridge. Both marines aimed their weapons at him. "Whoa there, gentlemen. I'm here to help."

"Lower your weapons," Desmond said. "Dulain, we're in trouble." He explained the situation and the AIA director smirked.

"They made a clever play. I have to give them that. But I think we're going to be fine. They didn't count on us successfully putting someone

in contact with the Orb so quickly. Now that we're engaged with the thing, it's just a matter of time before we have the data we need. However, it is troubling to think that the Pahxin fleet won't be in position."
"I wouldn't worry too much about that," Zach said. "They optimized the hell out of their course before they left. They should've arrived in a couple hours. I got a look at how they do calculations and it's intense. We shouldn't be alone … We'll just surprise everyone when we pop up so soon."
"Indeed." Dulain joined Salina. "Shall we look at that code?"
Desmond sat back at his station and contacted Gabriel to give him the news. The marine accepted the news with his usual stoic grunt and went on with his assignment. *Maybe it's not so urgent to find this traitor now. Or at least, we have less time for him to cause us trouble while we're in hyperspace. Small favors? Probably not.*

***

"Quinda!" Gil shouted his name. "Get in here!"
The man ran into the room, face contorted in fury. "What are you thinking, Vaedra? Do you want to get us all killed? You can't be shouting in a place like this! It carries who knows how deep? Those monsters might actually be down below us, sleeping … waiting for a fool to wake them up!"
"First off, I know for a fact my voice didn't carry that far," Gil replied. "Second, if they were down there asleep, your destruction of their door would've brought them running. Third, I needed you and I didn't feel like going all the way to the exit just to come all the way back. And finally, I need your two idiots who were trying to get in here before."
"Why?" Quinda scowled. "I thought you said they were useless."
"They were, but now I need assistance and they seem to be your own technical experts. Are there others?" A wicked thought crossed Gil's mind and he smiled. "Would you like to assist me? I wouldn't mind. I'm sure I could even show you what I need if you're worried you

won't have the ability to do so."
"No, I'll get them." Quinda shook his head as he walked away. "Just give them a few moments. They were on the perimeter watching out for problems."
"Do hurry." Gil turned back to the terminal and began typing on his tablet, effectively locking them out permanently. If they got hold of his computer and knew how to get into it, they might break the code but otherwise, the power formula was safe. *That part of the problem is solved. Now to get out of here*.
Heavy footsteps sounded from near the entrance and the two Kalrawv men came trundling along. Gil almost felt bad about what he needed to do but they'd probably done worse. Considering the way their company oppressed whole populations, none of them were entirely innocent.
Gil wondered about something he thought of earlier. If this whole situation was a memory, something conjured up by his subconscious, then nothing he did there mattered anyway. Killing those men or letting them live, it was just a variation on what *could* have happened. *But if I am just remembering something, then what happened to my body? Where is it?*
"A problem to be solved later," Gil muttered. He smiled at the two men. "I've gained access to the terminal but I'm afraid that the code is challenging enough that I'll need your help to break into it."
"What do we have to do?" The one on the left seemed particularly earnest. He stepped forward and peered at the terminal. "Hey, he did get in! Look at the screen!"
His companion joined him, and Gil stepped behind them both. "Just perform a scan of the data for me. I'll give you a moment to get used to the protocols."
They both buried themselves into their computers and Gil had to wonder why they were so trusting. Neither of them knew him and furthermore, they'd seen Quinda treat him terribly. Yet each of them indulged a little naivety while believing he truly required their assistance to break into the data.
Poor fools. Gil lashed out and snapped the one on his right's neck. The

body hit the ground before his friend even realized what was happening. The survivor looked down then started to turn a shocked gaze at Gil, mouth open in an unasked question. A quick jab to the man's throat sent him back against the terminal.

Gil kicked his knee out from under him so he went down. Picking up the man's pistol, Gil executed him with a shot to the back of the head then started toward the exit.

The structure rumbled like a true seismic event. Gil placed a hand on the wall to maintain his balance and kept moving. Screams drifted on the air, horrifying noises like an animal or deranged madman. *The locals*. They were up and about, possibly sent into a frenzy by the oncoming storm.

I have time before it hits but if those creatures get here before I take off, then I'll be dead.

Two guards stood outside the door, their weapons pressed against their shoulders. Gil fired while moving, taking them both out with quick headshots. He heard someone outside shout but they were too busy worrying about the incoming monsters to notice their friends were dead.

He stepped outside and slid to a halt, eyes widening as he looked to the horizon. An absolute horde of mutated fiends crested the cliffs and began plunging toward them, screaming while waving makeshift weapons over their heads. Kalrawv soldiers fired into them, killing or wounding the first ranks but it didn't slow down the charge.

The muscular beasts simply trampled their companions and continued on. At first, they were little more than a sea of olive green but as they closed, Gil made out their features. Bald, obscenely well-built and wearing loin cloths for modesty, their faces were contorted with rage and violence.

Kalrawv didn't have the firepower on the planet's surface to take care of such an attack. They would all be going for the shuttle soon and the people inside would've been forgotten. *If I hadn't decided to try to get out of here, I would've died in this place. Quinda would not have stayed nor come back for me*.

The data might be important but self-preservation beat it out. At least,

that's what Gil thought. He suddenly recalled that the Kalrawv Group went after the Gnosis spaceship and sacrificed themselves, fought to the death. Maybe he was wrong about them and they wouldn't flee in light of the danger they faced.

Regardless of the fact that they didn't have any way of fending off such a force.

Gil ran for the shuttle and bumped into Quinda hard enough for both men to hit the ground. Each sat up at the same time and they exchanged a confused expression. The pain of impact stunned Gil for only a moment before he lifted his weapon. "You were going to leave me down here!"

"You had the peace of mind to get out!" Quinda began to rise but paused. "Where did you get that? Why are you pointing it at me? Put it down! We don't have time for this!"

"I'm afraid not!" Gil went to pull the trigger. Quinda threw a kick, knocking the weapon free just as a blast discharged. Chunks of gravel bounced in the air as the two men grappled.

They rolled, Quinda awkwardly punched Gil in the face. The glancing blow wasn't enough to slow him down.

Gil came out on top, grabbed Quinda by his ears and slammed his head into the stone. The struggle slowed. Quinda threw his legs up, attempting to buck Gil free. The motion didn't work and Gil again pounded him into the ground.

Quinda's eyes lulled in his head and he slumped. Gil scrambled for the pistol, picking it up and spinning in place, taking two shots. They caught Quinda in the chest, making his body convulse and fall still.

Other Kalrawv agents were battling the creatures, which were nearly to the shuttle. Gil hurried aboard and engaged the thrusters, slamming his hand against the panel to close the back door. The horizon darkened with the storm as it approached rapidly. He estimated less than three minutes before it would hit the temple.

Kicking on the afterburners, Gil was plunged into his seat. He aimed up and away from the storm, praying he'd attain orbit quickly. An alarm went off, a warning about the weather. He distracted himself by trying to plot a hyperspace course to the nearest coordinates he could

think of.
The computer screen showed a blue planet, somewhere in the Sol system. *Earth. That's not how this went before!* The shuttle shook violently. The sky turned gray then dark blue. He saw stars as the storm lessened. *I did not go to Earth* …The shuttle shimmered and without prompting or hitting a button, it plunged into hyperspace.
"No!" Gil shouted, looking for an override but it was too late.
However long he had to be there, he would be in hyperspace. Providing he had enough resources on board to survive a prolonged trip, it may not be so bad. Where he was going, that might've been another story. Did they have any advanced facilities? Food? Water?
Yes, they are advanced. They have space travel. "I should not know this!" Gil pressed his palms against his forehead and when he looked up, it appeared that he was plunging into a brilliant, white light. *That is not hyperspace!* Fear tingled in his heart but there was no choice of what would happen next, no hope of turning around.
I suppose I will learn the secret of this puzzle after all, Gil thought, steadying himself. *I've spent my whole life studying the unknown. Now, I finally get to meet it*.

***

Christina met with Lieutenant Commander Nathaniel Webber, chief engineer of the Gnosis. Gaining access to his section proved to be a real pain since Gabriel left strict orders that no one was to be admitted. She had to pull him in to get through, but her investigation required information from the tech side of the house.
Dulain sent her a message stating that whoever they were looking for optimized the hyperspace coordinates to reduce the amount of time the ship would be under. She hoped Webber could give her some insight on exactly how they did it and specifically, where they performed the task.
"They could've done it from down here," Webber explained. "But anyone with decent enough computer skills could've pulled it off from a tech lab. The calculations they used to make this happen are well

beyond the capacity of our computers. Whatever they used is powerful, like some kind of super tablet."
"Or just one with an application beyond our understanding," Christina replied. "After all, they might have already built something able to do what we're talking about. However, even with the numbers, they had to input them somewhere. How do we find out what part of the ship they accessed the navigation system?"
Webber sighed, turning to the console in his office. He tapped away for a moment, peering through logs. "Only Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan and Lieutenant Deacon Neville should've accessed that station since our departure from Earth. Anyone else we find in the logs would have been unauthorized."
Christina doubted they used their own login. That meant they must've compromised one of the two men's accounts. But how? The encryption on passwords was insane and most of the systems used biometrics as a two-factor authentication. One of the two pilots may have been the traitor … or at least collaborating.
Or one or the other has been killed. Christina sent an encrypted text message to Dulain, asking him to have Zachary and Deacon checked out. She let him know that one or the other may be hurt, dead or missing. With the marines running all over the ship, it wouldn't take them long to figure it out.
"Just the two of them," Webber said. He scowled at the screen, humming.
"What is it?" Christina asked. "Did you find something?"
"Well … Deacon accessed the system literally seven minutes before we went into hyperspace. He remained logged in until the ship made the plunge." Webber shrugged. "That's when the changes must've been made to the course. There's no other point when it could've been done."
"Where did he do it from?"
"Tech station six," Webber tapped his screen. "Terminal five. That's on deck four. I can show you if you want."
"I do." Christina established a connection to Gabriel. "Captain, I need you to have someone lockdown tech station six right away."

“Why?” Gabriel asked.
“Because we’ve discovered something, and I want to recover some evidence. Anyone who’s in there needs to be detained. Also, we need camera footage of the area from the time frame just before we went into hyperspace. Providing it’s still there, we’ll have a solid view of our traitor … or one of them at least.”
“I’d begun to worry about a conspiracy as well,” Gabriel replied, “that we were dealing with more than one person.”
“It’s never easy,” Christina said. “Chief Webber and I are on our way to that tech lab now. Thanks for your help.” She gestured for the door.
“Shall we place bets on whether or not our traitor was smart enough to erase camera footage of themselves? I’m leaning toward yes … Especially considering everything else they’ve managed to do so far.”
“No bet,” Webber muttered. “May I just say you AIA folks are pretty close to what I imagined.”
“What do you mean?” Christina asked as they walked toward the elevator. She sent a message to Dulain asking him to have the camera feed checked.
“Just … I always thought you’d be a little brazen, kind of flippant.” Webber shrugged. “You fit the bill.”
“Wow, I’m flippant and brazen?” Christina chuckled. “Very flattering, Chief. I don’t know what to say.”
“I …” Webber’s cheeks flushed. “I didn’t necessarily mean that the way it came out.”
Christina waved her hand at him. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve been called far worse, and by people who know me well, so I’m good. But honestly, after working with Admiral Reach for so long, I’m surprised you didn’t think of me as uptight and exacting. That’s how I’ve felt over the past year. Until that ambassadorial detail at least.”
“I heard a little about that.” Webber tapped the button to summon the elevator. “What part did you play?”
“What did you hear?”
“That the admiral and Pahxin ambassador were kidnapped.”
“I was with them,” Christina said. “And managed to escape. Luckily, you guys came along and gave us a way off the planet. I hadn’t

worked out exactly where we were going to go. There were ships but I didn't have the training to initiate a hyperspace jump. I had to hope the ambassador knew how."

"Good to have some cavalry then, huh?"

Christina boarded the elevator, nodding. "You have no idea. Prior to working with Reach, backup wasn't even in our vocabulary. I've managed to get out of a few tough scrapes but even in recollection, I don't know how I'm still alive. I shouldn't be. Time and again I managed to luck out … come up with some trick or other … Life of an agent, I guess."

"Sounds exciting."

"More like lonely, frightening and depressing," Christina replied, "if I'm to be honest." The elevator stopped and as the doors opened, she saw two marines standing near a door halfway down the hall. "Is that where we're going? They sure locked it down faster than I thought they would."

Webber nodded. "It is … I'm surprised too. They must've been scouring this area already. Come on. I'll show you the terminal in question."

The guards nodded to them as they passed by, each wearing the same stern expression Gabriel adopted when she spoke to the man in his office. *I wonder if they teach that in their basic training*. Three technicians stood up when they entered, each speaking at the same time, protesting their detainment.

Christina held up her hands. "Hold on. Just stop. We've got a lot going on so complaining about security measures isn't going to get you very far. Give us a moment, we'll ask you a few questions and you'll be able to go. Thank you for your patience." She turned to Webber. "Shall we hurry?"

"It's over here." Webber led her to a terminal and gestured to it. "This is how they entered the new data into the navigation system."

"Interesting." Christina used her tablet to scan the terminal, looking for any sort of forensic evidence. She hoped for fingerprints, but it was completely clean. Trying it on a different terminal, she picked up dozens of touch points and each of them checked out as members of

the Gnosis crew. “So they wiped this thing down.”
“They must’ve known we’d check, huh?”
Christina narrowed her eyes as she sat down, logging into the terminal. It came right up, and she searched for the local log files. They were all deleted. *Of course, but I had to be thorough*. “Okay, if the camera has footage of this person, I will eat my tablet.” She stood up and turned to the technicians.
One was a young man who couldn’t have been more than twenty years old. His brown hair was growing back in from recently being shaved and he kept his uniform immaculate. Of the three, he looked the most nervous and complained with less vigor. He was probably still on his first tour.
The second was a woman, possibly in her thirties but it was hard to tell with her hair pulled back in a severe ponytail, drawing her brows higher than they normally would’ve been. She glared at Christina the whole time, definitely the loudest voice in the room and possibly the highest ranking. She appeared to be a lieutenant.
The final technician was a larger man, standing at least six-four with a neatly trim beard and a layered haircut. He also looked annoyed but nowhere near as annoyed as the woman. She noted his insignia put him as an ensign.
“Okay, how long have three been in this room?”
“Most of the day,” the lieutenant said. “We’re in charge of testing hyperspace anomalies to the inner workings of the ship. Your guards are keeping us from leaving shift and I don’t have to tell Chief Webber that downtime is important when you have another shift in six hours.”
“I’m sure we can make an exception or something.” Christina shook her head. “Really, you guys need to understand, we’re trying to lock down a security threat to the entire ship. Whether you get a nap won’t matter much if something happens. Now, do you remember anyone coming in here and using this terminal?”
“Before we entered hyperspace,” the big guy said. “I saw someone come in.”
“Yeah?” Christina approached him. “He used this computer?”
“He did … I … I didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

“That’s okay, what’s your name?”
“Ben, ma’am.”
“Okay, Ben. What did he look like? Can you give me a description?”
The lieutenant interjected, “Can’t you just check the cameras? Why are we needed?”
“There’s no way this person left the cameras intact considering what they were up to,” Christina replied. “Now, Ben … please … describe the individual for me?”
“Wow … I mean … he was shorter than me.”
“Who isn’t?” Christina smiled. “Go on.”
“Probably five-nine or ten at the most. Brown hair … severe features. I … I noticed he had some pretty intense cheek bones.”
“Interesting.” Christina made a note. “Go on. What else?”
“Um … I don’t know … Wait!” Ben snapped his fingers. “He was wearing one of those engineering uniforms, you know, the Pahxin ones?”
“Yeah? You saw those guys?”
“I was leaving the engineering section when a couple came in,” Ben replied. “Yeah, I recognized what they wore. The white one with gray?”
Christina nodded. “Exactly. How long did he stay?”
“Just until we went into hyperspace, then he left.”
Webber turned to the lieutenant. “And you didn’t think to question a Pahxin researcher coming in here and using our damn tech lab?”
“I’m sorry, Chief,” the lieutenant replied, “I was a little preoccupied with my job. I didn’t even notice the person that Ben’s talking about.”
“Wow …” Webber shook his head.
“Thanks … All of you.” Christina checked her messages and saw she had one from Dulain. *Camera feed seems to have been erased but this fine technician up here has a backup. We’re getting to it now, but it will take a bit. Did you find anything?*
Christina typed back, *a description of the person. A loose one anyway but how many Pahxin can there be with prominent cheek bones, five-nine and darker hair?*
A lot, I’m sure, Dulain replied. *Keep me informed. I’m still working on this*

code to get through the message to find out exactly what they sent to our enemies.

Any luck? Christina typed.

Not yet. This guy was good at his job. Too bad the intelligence division didn't find out about him sooner. They could've recruited him before the Tol'An got hold of his talents. Talk soon.

Christina turned to Webber. "I need to get to the research lab and put out a description for the marines to look for. I don't want to take up any more of your time if you have other things to do. Thank you so much for your assistance, by the way. I really appreciate the cooperation. Investigations like these can be rough."

"I understand." Webber shook her hand and turned to the three technicians. "You are free to go now. Thanks for your help."

"About time," the lieutenant grumbled as she stormed out of the room.

Christina shook her head, chuckling after they left. "Unbelievable, huh? Totally locked into her routine to the point that anything else is just a distraction … an inconvenience."

"Sometimes, you just want to do your job and go back to your room, I guess," Webber replied. "I'll talk to you later, Agent Dawson."

Christina waved at him and prepared herself for the research lab. If she found her quarry there, things might go down hard. She checked her weapon and headed for the elevator. In the next twenty minutes, she might very well find their traitor … and a whole lot more than she bargained for besides.

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Chapter 9

Vincent conferred with Harper on a way to scan the Pahxin. They were under the impression it *should* work by asking some qualifying questions. He tried it on Thayne and when he lied, there was a distinct change in the readings. That would be enough to work through the remaining people in the room.

He worked through the various technicians and all of them checked out. He felt both relieved and frustrated by the discovery. On the positive side, the traitor didn't likely have access to Cassie or Gil. On the negative, he or she was still loose somewhere on the ship, looking for more ways to cause trouble.

The doctors brought Heat in shortly after. Harper approached and spoke with Holland at length before they moved the marine to another bed near the Orb. Vincent had some questions, but he simply moved closer to pick on their conversation. He decided to record it for his report, to send to the captain.

"Our theory," Harper explained, "is that proximity to the Orb may help with interfacing with it. Naturally, if Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow was impacted somewhere else on the ship, that's not necessarily the case. That said, if he truly is involved, this might help him come out of it. It's hard to say for sure."

"What do we know about this situation?" Holland asked. "I mean truly understand? Because it seems like we're just guessing and hoping."

Harper sighed. "You're not wrong. We're doing our best. As you know, we know a great deal about the Orbs but they are an alien technology with vast depths."

"I'm looking at three people who are essentially catatonic," Holland said. "Can I at least see the blood work you've done? I'd like a better understanding of their condition so I might be able to help at some point if it becomes necessary."

"Yes, you're welcome to do so." Harper nodded to one of the technicians. "Please show him all the results of our tests. If you'll just step over to the terminal, they'll share our findings with you. I'm sorry

that it's frustrating. Believe me, we all want answers. That's partially why we're here."

Holland stepped away and Vincent returned to his position by the door. He glanced up and noted a couple of people hovering over Cassie. Part of him wanted to go and tell them to back off. There was no reason for anyone to be crowding her at that point. He shoved off from the wall when the door opened and Dawson entered.

She grabbed Vincent's arm. "Commander, I'm glad you're still here. I need your help finding a person." She described a Pahxin with high cheek bones, darker hair and around five-nine. He looked around the room, pausing at one of the men near Cassie. "This is the description of the man who optimized our hyperspace jump."

Vincent really scowled. "What about him?" He gestured with his chin.

"The guy standing next to Cassie." He matched the description pretty well but there were others much like him. Still, it seemed an odd coincidence that he would be in the research lab. If he proved to be the traitor, there were two problems.

One, it would mean he had found a way to pass the lie detector test and two, he was in a perfect position to hurt the people in the experiment.

"We need to move." Vincent stepped over to the man and pulled him roughly away from Cassie. "Excuse me, we need to talk."

"What are you doing?" The man insisted, giving him an indignant look. "I am very busy here! You cannot simply drag me from my work!"

"Yes, we can," Christina said. "Let's talk in the hall." She checked her list. "Brexan, isn't it?"

Brexan looked between the two of them, eyes narrowing. Vincent sensed what was to come, a desperate action about to take place. Reaching for his gun, Vincent inhaled to call out for the guards. Christina picked up on his vibe and went for her own weapon, dropping her tablet in the process.

It hadn't even hit the ground when Brexan hopped toward Cassie, lifting his stylus over his head. He brought it down, aiming to stab his target in the gut. Christina fired her weapon, catching him in the

shoulder. The report of the bullet sent the room into chaos with people screaming and the guards darting inside.
People jostled Vincent as he tried to keep an eye on Brexan but the man slipped through the crowd. “After him!” He shouted. “Dawson, he’s moving for the door!”
“I’m on him!” Christina called. “Get me some backup when you contain this mess!”
“I’ll do what I can!” Vincent shoved the people out of his way. “Everyone stop! Calm down! Just … Damn it, I said calm down!” It would take him some time to restore order. He noticed Christina was gone. *At least someone’s after that asshole. God, I hope she’s got this covered. He needs to pay for what he tried to do*.
Both to the ship … and to Cassie.

***

Christina bolted through the door, sprinting down the hall after Brexan. The man had a good head start and had already made it to the elevator. *Where the hell do you think you’re going?* He clearly had some agenda in mind but while they were in hyperspace, he was stuck. Unless he planned on locking himself up and buying time.
For what? Does he think the Tol’An will save him when they try to take the Orbs?
The doors opened and he hopped aboard, slapping the button to get the door closed. Christina arrived just as they were whispering shut and she slid inside, leading with her shoulder. As she connected with Brexan, he was battered into the wall but it didn’t daze him as she’d hoped.
He reeled back and threw a punch. Christina faded to the side and kneed him in the stomach. Brexan bent at the waist and tried to grapple, wrapping his arms about her midsection.
The elevator began to move. She wrapped her arm about his head and squeezed. He cried out and pressed forward, shoving her against the wall. The leverage worked to Christina’s advantage. Kneeing him again, this time in the chest, she brought her elbow down at the same

time. He huffed, a loud exhale indicating she'd knocked the wind out of him.

Brexan stumbled backward, leaning against the wall. Christina prepared to finish him off, a final punch to conclude the fight when he pulled a knife. Swinging wildly, he sliced through her shirt, nipping her skin. The close quarters meant she didn't have anywhere to go to avoid it and the next slash went for her shoulder.

The blade cut through her shirt, the sting of the cut making her wince. Christina grabbed his wrist, twisting until she heard a snap. Brexan cried out and started to collapse. She didn't let him, planting her knee on his side as he took to his knees and snapping his arm at the shoulder.

Falling on his side, he passed out and she leaned against the wall trying to catch her breath.

The doors opened. Marines aimed weapons inside with Gabriel standing behind them. Christina lifted her hands. "Don't shoot," she muttered. "I got the guy."

Gabriel came forward and looked at Brexan. He nodded, face set in a stoic mask. "Good job, Agent." He paused, eyes moving over the blood on her clothes. "You should get those checked out. Men, take this criminal scum down to the brig and have medical meet you there. I doubt Pahxin arms are supposed to go that direction."

Christina watched them drag the traitor off and she thought about giving Dulain a quick update. She realized she'd left her tablet back in the research lab. Gabriel would take care of sending a message to the captain. And if there was someone else besides Brexan, the marines could deal with them.

I think I've earned a minute of downtime.

***

Desmond received word from Gabriel about what happened. He turned to Dulain and Salina. "They caught the traitor. One of them at least. How far are you along with decoding the message?"

"Almost there," Dulain said. "Though I'm hoping we're about to

confirm that we have the right man. I would be surprised if more than one managed to sneak aboard considering the effort my agents went through. Sincerely, it's a miracle this maniac managed to do it. I'd like to study his method when we're done."
"Much as your professional curiosity makes sense," Desmond said, "let's just make sure this gets done, huh? We're going to be out of hyperspace soon and likely arrive in a serious brawl so I'd like to know the only enemy I have to deal with is outside. I've had enough of people running around causing trouble on the ship."
"We'll figure out an enhanced form of security," Dulain replied. "Believe me. I don't want to see this happen again either."
"Captain." Zach grabbed his attention. "This traitor did something to the navigation program."
"Sabotaged it?" Desmond asked. He sighed. "How bad?"
"You misunderstand me," Zach replied, "he didn't break it … He made it better."
"Wait, what?"
Zach nodded. "I'm looking at the code. He recompiled it completely … added some sort of AI component that constantly evaluates the coordinates and updates them *on the fly*. That's how we didn't know right when we left that there was a problem. Somehow, this update makes it so we can increase speed by small course corrections constantly performed."
"That doesn't seem possible." Desmond looked over his shoulder at the code. "Did you know it could do that?"
Zach shook his head. "No, but the Pahxin alluded to something like that when we talked. They made it sound like they'd be able to help us with our module … but I didn't get the impression they meant something like this."
"Okay, so what's that mean for our time in hyperspace? What're you telling me right now?"
"That we're looking at less than ten minutes before we emerge."
Dulain looked up. "What? No! You have to find a way to adjust the course … to buy our people more time!"
"I don't know how," Zach said. "I hope they hurry … whatever they're

doing."
"You have no idea …" Dulain turned back to what he was doing, looking grave for the first time since Desmond encountered him. "Harper talked about what might happen to them if I'm right about the hyperspace activity being required for this type of thing. They may never wake up from that catatonic state."
"Then I hope you guys are wrong," Desmond said.
"More than you know, captain," Dulain replied. "Far more than you know."

***

Cassie closed her eyes and plunged into the light. Nothingness surrounded her, just blank white with no texture or substance. Her feet remained in contact with something hard, like tile or cement but as she waved her arms about her, she met no resistance, nothing but air. If it weren't for the fact she could see her own limbs, she'd have thought she'd gone blind.
"Hello?" A voice caught her attention from the left and she moved in that direction. It seemed familiar, a man she knew somewhat well but couldn't place his name. "Is anyone there? Hello?"
"I'm here!" Cassie shouted back. "I'm right here! Hello? Who's there?"
"It's Geoff!" He replied, then said, "Heat! Um … Cassie?"
"Yes! Oh God …" Memories flooded back to her all in a rush. The subtle visions gave way to real fact, to knowledge. The experiment must've worked and far more profoundly than they anticipated. Or maybe they had tapped into some other part of the Orb entirely, something that allowed them to revisit their past memories like a VR simulation. "Have you been here long?"
"I don't know how to answer that," Heat replied. "It's a bit of a haze. Where the hell are you? I can't see shit!"
"Just …" Cassie hesitated and started moving in the direction she heard him. "Hold on, I'll come to you." Every step felt like she wasn't progressing, like she hadn't actually moved. Disorientation threatened to overwhelm her and she didn't know if she was going in the right

direction. “Keep talking! I don’t want to get turned around!”
“Okay … Um … Hello, follow the sound of my voice. I’m right here …”
His silhouette came into view and Cassie felt a profound sense of relief wash over her. “I see you! Thank God!”
“Yeah! There you are!” Heat waved. He was wearing a black tactical outfit, blood speckling his face. “What the hell happened to you?”
By contrast, she wore a black body suit, the skintight uniform issued to her so AIA administrators could track her vital statistics during her test. Under Heat’s scrutiny, she felt suddenly self-conscious about it.
“Um … I don’t even know how to explain. Did you experience some memory? An event from your past?”
“Yes,” Heat replied. “I was on a mission with … with Gorman.”
“And I revisited one of the tests for the AIA … but it was different than the first time. Some guy attacked me toward the end. The things he said, I don’t remember. It was really strange. It felt right until it didn’t.”
“Exactly!” Heat nodded emphatically. “That’s how it seemed for me too.”
“There must’ve been a reason, something about those memories that stuck out for us.”
“I believe you are right.” Gil’s voice startled them both as he joined them.
“What the hell?” Heat grunted. “Warn a guy, man!”
“My apologies. I heard you talking and merely approached. We can now identify the reason the Orb has brought us here and hopefully interface with it as we intended.” Gil tilted his head. “I lived through my little encounter with the Kalrawv Group when they so desperately wanted the power formula to make better bombs.”
“There was a white light at the end of mine,” Heat said. “Felt like I’d died or something.”
“Me too,” Cassie replied. “I think I figured it out. Our visions acted like … like a lock, a code we had to enter to access the data. Like putting in your password before you use a terminal on the ship.”
“Gives new meaning to picking your security image,” Heat muttered.

“Why those visions in particular?”
“Each of them had some sort of transition,” Gil replied. “Mine ended in hyperspace.”
“Mine had a finish line,” Cassie said.
“Yeah, I was in a hallway,” Heat added. “We were almost done … ready to enter the room and secure it.”
“There you go.” Cassie shrugged. “Going from point A to B and now that we’re here … What the hell do we do?”
Gil sighed. “I wish Thayne would’ve been the one who got zapped in here. He’d have a better chance of figuring that out.” He turned away, head bowed in thought. “Now that we are here … well … your computer theory holds some truth. We could simply offer a query, direct questions specifically to the Orb.”
Heat waved his hand at Gil. “Come on, it can’t possibly be that easy. It has to be something else … something like a terminal or God knows but you can’t just start shouting words into this light. That’s impossible.”
“You just relived an old mission,” Cassie said, “and you’re willing to say something is impossible?”
Heat blushed, scratching the back of his head. “Okay, if you’re correct, then we’re not *actually* here, right? Like … this is our consciousness interacting with it. And if so, then why do we feel things? Like the ground or even each other when we touch? You’d think we’d be disembodied.”
“You are asking the wrong question,” Gil said. “It does not matter how this works, only that it does. I will attempt something simple.” He cleared his throat. “Show me a design for a common excavation scanner with enough range to cover thirty to fifty kilometers in a highly volatile environment.”
At first nothing happened. Cassie was about to say something when a blue flash made her wince. Stumbling back, she held her hands up and peered through her fingers, noting that a three-dimensional image had appeared near Gil, showing the inner workings of the device he requested information on.
“Incredible!” Cassie breathed. “We … we really *are* inside the Orb!”

“Fantastic,” Heat grumbled. “So now we just have to figure out how the hell to get out of here and where the other Orbs are.”
“We could learn a great deal from this,” Gil added. “We should not squander this opportunity.”
“But we do have an objective.” Cassie narrowed her eyes. “Provide me with the knowledge of how to interface with the Orb like this under any circumstances.” She held her breath. Gil gave her an approving look, nodding his head. *Well, at least I impressed someone with my cleverness*.
A moment passed and it once again seemed like nothing might happen when a strong breeze struck Cassie in the face, nearly knocking her to the ground. Heat grabbed her, steadying her so she didn’t collapse. He grunted and as she turned to face him, her own muscles went stiff.
Gil stepped forward and touched them both, throwing his head back the moment he made contact. A blue glow surrounded them, covering their bodies and blocking out the white around them. Cassie felt understanding wash over her, a sense of what went wrong when they had tried to connect with the Orb before.
Part of it came from genetic disposition. Cassie’s ancestors, some ancient member of her bloodline, had contact with the Orb, however brief that impacted all of them. However, that could be overcome. The harmonic resonance of hyperspace, not the hum of the metal in the hull or the way the electronics operated but the air itself.
They *could* replicate it but they continually tried to impact the room itself back on Earth. Yes, they tried some sound waves but always noises that the ship would’ve made. Even at every frequency, it did not work. They missed one, something they didn’t have a tool to generate but Cassie had a piece of the puzzle to do so now.
The three of them separated, stumbling backward.
“What the hell?” Heat gripped his head. “Oh my God, I do *not* want to know this! How did that happen?”
“You now know why the three of us were brought here together,” Gil said. “Not to insult our two fine cultures, but I do not think our brains are capable of taking in entire concepts in their entirety, not directly from the Orb at least. And our interfaces, the ones we built, filter the

data in a watered-down way."
"Fabulous …" Heat glared at Cassie then turned to Gil. "Why the hell did it pick me? How'd I get this detail? I'm seriously thinking it made a mistake."
"That is not impossible," Gil replied. "The Orb is not a traditional machine. It has more in common with intelligent beings than a tool. However, as we bring them together, I believe they will become … better. Enhanced. More intelligent. Now that we know how to interface with them properly, our understanding will grow exponentially."
"Along with them," Cassie said, "as we bring them together. But I think we should get on with it." She closed her eyes. "Show us where the other Orbs are. Give us coordinates."
This time, there was no delay, no pause. The information presented itself in the form of a glowing star map. Part of it began to throb, showing Sol. Two other areas began to flash, places that didn't mean anything to Cassie but would burn in her memory. Once she got to a navigation computer, she'd be able to nail the two locations down.
Hopefully the Pahxin will have a clue about these places. It would figure if they were out in the middle of some unknown, lost bit of space. "Did you guys see that?"
"Yes." Gil smirked. "We have succeeded!"
"Thank God!" Heat's shoulders slumped. "Now, to get the hell out of here?"
"But there are so many questions …" Gil frowned when Cassie quirked her brow at him. "Oh, very well. I suppose you are right. Shall we then?"
"Just like that?" Cassie asked.
"Why not?" Gil stepped away. "Terminate connection."
Gil faded out until he was no longer there. Heat recoiled. "Are you kidding me?" He turned to Cassie. "He had no idea if that meant what he thought it meant. He could be back on the Gnosis right now or dead for all we know. That was crazy!"
"What would you have tried?" Cassie couldn't hide the fact that she was also shaken. "He treated it like a computer. That makes the most

sense considering how we typically interact with it … right?"
"I don't know." Heat tilted his head. "I'd defer to you! You're the damn expert about these things. Jesus Christ!" He paced away. "I … I don't know."
"Gil made it and I'm sure I can too but you'd better at least try before I do or you might get stuck." Cassie shrugged at his annoyed look. "I'm just being honest."
"I love your honesty." Heat sighed and turned his head high. "Orb!" He shouted.
"Dude … you don't have to turn on the drama."
"Shut up, I'm doing this my way!"
"Okay." Cassie stepped away. "Do what you have to do."
"Orb!" Heat repeated. "Terminate connection!" Half a moment passed. "Holy shit!" He winked out of existence, leaving Cassie alone.
Okay, two down. Cassie peered around the area, staring into the endless expanse of white. The journey had been long, strange even, but the knowledge they acquired, the lock they cracked would change everything. Providing they could build the device to replicate the frequency, teach others to interface with the Orbs, they would unravel several mysteries.
But first, we save the galaxy from the threat of the Tol'An. Cassie cleared her throat. "Terminate connection."

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Chapter 10

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden nearly ran into his peer from a different unit, Anna Jager. They were both en route to the hangar bay when their wings were put on standby. Apparently, the Gnosis would be dropping out of hyperspace at any minute and according to the incredibly fast briefing, they could be attacked.

"Hey there," Dennis said. "Always a party around this place, huh?"

"Never dull at least," Anna replied. They moved in toward their fighters. "I'll see you out there. Be careful, Dennis."

"Usually am. If you want to impart that on to someone who needs it though, consider telling Officer Quinn. She's pretty out of control."

Anna chuckled. "I don't know, Alicia might be the best pilot you have. Or at least the one with the biggest balls."

"Oh, she'd love to hear you say that." Dennis boarded his fighter and prepped it for launch. All systems showed green. The rest of his squadron reported in, ready to go. The timer showed they would be leaving hyperspace in just over a minute. *It was longer when we got into the hangar. What the hell's going on?*

"Fighters," Salina's voice piped through the tactical line. "Please note that we will be dropping out of hyperspace sooner than expected. I see that you're all ready for launch. I'll be calling order the moment we emerge and it's deemed safe. We've gone to battle stations throughout the ship. Thank you for getting ready in such a hurry."

Yeah, no problem. Dennis checked the private channel of his squadron. "Everyone still good? Any concerns?"

"Curious about how we're suddenly so awesome with hyperspace," Alicia said, "but otherwise, nah. I'm good."

Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring said, "Anything I'd ask about would be academic right now. You think there will be a real force to contend with when we arrive or are we talking a few rogue Tol'An? Full battle or just a skirmish?"

"The way they're talking," Dennis replied, "I'm thinking full scale battle. We should be ready for anything either way. And every

fighter's heading out there. That should tell you something about the odds that we're anticipating. Cost of dealing with treasonous assholes, I guess."
"That the technical term?" Alicia asked.
"Can it, Quinn." Dennis shook his head. "I think we need your wit about as much as we need a screen door for the cockpit."
"Might make it a little less hot in here," Lieutenant Hal Brown quipped.
"Alright, alright, let's focus a little more and joke around less, okay?" Dennis noted they were dropping out of hyperspace. *I'd love to make a couple trips where I didn't have to sit in my fighter while we left faster-than-light travel.* The confined space made re-entry all the more uncomfortable, turning his stomach and causing head pain.
The ship vibrated, causing the fighter to shake. Zach announced their departure from hyperspace and expressed they indeed were facing enemy starships. Whether the Pahxin allies were on hand to help, that didn't get related and Dennis's scanner hadn't finished capturing outside data to be of any use quite yet.
Hurry! Dennis willed the computer to speed up. *I want to know how bad this is out there, what we're facing and just how wild this brawl's about to be.*

***

Desmond clenched his fists in the few seconds before they emerged from hyperspace. The viewscreen flickered to life, revealing the chaos of battle. Fighters darted about and capital ships went toe to toe. Energy blasts made shields light up, the blue-green shells flickering in and out as they were hit.
"Get the fighters out there now," Desmond ordered. "Shields up. Do you have the Stalwart on scans?"
"Yes, sir," Salina said. "They are out there.
"Get Ulian on the line as soon as you can." Desmond turned to Dulain. "I hope you can work under a little bit of pressure."
"I'll do my best," Dulain replied. He clearly struggled not to watch the

viewscreen though. Desmond understood why. Witnessing space combat first hand was quite a bit different than reading the reports or watching a simulation. Thinking about everything that could go wrong alone would be enough to impact someone's nerves.

The scan report came in and Desmond noted they were up against seven Tol'An ships. There were eight Pahxin vessels in the system, three of which were full-on warships. Two destroyers and three scouts made up the rest of their fleet and they were holding their own against the threat.

I'm guessing better trained crews helps a lot.

"Com is established," Salina announced.

Captain Ulian Hataran appeared in the lower left-hand corner of the viewscreen, his face etched in a stoic expression. "Welcome, Gnosis," he said, "though I must admit I'm surprised to see you here so soon. I thought we had agreed upon a much longer time frame. Did something happen?"

"You have no idea," Desmond replied. "I'll tell you about it when this fight is over. How can we help?"

"We could use you on their flank," Ulian said. "Fighters and capital ships. Give us some distraction so we can really push them. We figured we'd have plenty of time to push these maniacs back but I'm beginning to wonder if they'll have reinforcements soon. If your early arrival was part of their plan, then we should make haste."

"Understood." Desmond nodded. "We're on it and will coordinate with your forces." He disconnected the com. "Let the fighters know what we need them to do. Zach, put us in position and go weapons free. Hit them with everything we've got. You heard Ulian. We have to hurry and get our asses out of here before more of these jerks show up."

***

Vincent felt the ship leave hyperspace and his heart began to race. His eyes went immediately to Cassie, sweat breaking on his brow. The screen above her bed showed her vitals were still fine but brain activity appeared to increase. He had no idea if that was a good thing

or not.
“What the hell is going on?” Harper slapped her terminal. “Why did we leave hyperspace? This experiment is nowhere near complete! Damn it!”
“It wasn’t planned,” Vincent replied. “How is … How are they?”
“I don’t know.” Harper paused. “Yeah, I don’t have a clue.”
“I do,” Holland interjected. “Look. Agent Alexander is moving.”
Vincent’s eyes went wide as he stepped closer. Cassie stirred, brow furrowing in a wince. Her eyes fluttered open and she swallowed hard. “Hey …” she muttered. “Where are we? Are we not in hyperspace anymore?”
“We’re not,” Harper said. “I have no idea what’s going on with the bridge but I’m glad to see you back. We were worried about what might happen while you were under and … well, you know. How do you feel?”
“Tired …” Cassie looked around. “How is Gil? And Heat?”
“They seem to be coming around as well,” Holland announced.
“Good.”
“Did you … connect?” Harper asked. “Have you made contact with the Orbs?”
“We did. It was … God, I have quite the report to write.” Cassie blinked several times. “More importantly, we know how to access the Orbs in this way again.”
“That’s fantastic news!” Harper patted Cassie’s shoulder. “Did you hear that Thayne?”
“If that’s true, then you have discovered a breakthrough which will change the course of science. Providing, of course, that the interface method is better than our current variety.”
“Believe me,” Cassie replied. “It definitely is but it’ll take some getting used to. Can I please get up?”
Holland examined her vitals carefully and nodded. “Yes, you seem to be totally fine, Agent.” He disengaged the table and helped her to sit up. “Let me get you some water. You’re a touch dehydrated after all that. You must’ve gone through some type of exertion that pushed the body, huh?”

“Again, you have no idea.” Cassie turned to Vincent and smiled at him. “You didn’t happen to wait here the entire time, did you?”
“It’s … been a little eventful for us too,” Vincent said. The ship shook.
“Oh boy. We went to battle stations and it feels like we’re starting something. Will you be okay? I should get to the bridge to help.”
“I’ll be fine.” Cassie waved for him to go. “Hurry now. I’ll try to join you if these guys will let me.”
“Thanks …” Vincent gripped her hand for a moment before rushing out of the room and to the elevator. *Time to put this mission to bed. I hope we’re up for this final challenge. It would be nice if fate would throw us a bone here at the very end.*

***

Alicia Quinn peered at her scanner, noting it came back with a count of forty enemy fighters. The Tol’An really brought some friends to the party. They didn’t bother with so many ships when they attacked Earth. *Maybe they finally have some respect for what we’re capable of but I kind of doubt it.*
More likely, they simply brought the numbers they thought would be able to take down the Pahxin fleet sent there to escort the Gnosis. Even so, it didn’t *seem* to be a strong enough force for the professional military they faced. Having flown with Pahxin pilots, Alicia knew they were damn good at their jobs.
The zealots, while tenacious and clever, couldn’t stand up to them. They didn’t have the discipline. Their equipment definitely stood on par with their opponents but without the continuous training on how best to put it to use, they were insurgents with rocket launchers. Dangerous, yes, but ultimately ineffective.
“We’re going to break for combat momentarily,” Dennis called out. He took operational command of the mission, even over Anna and Dimitri Gerrit, the new Squadron Leader of Raptor. “On my mark, engage your targets and let’s make a push for the capital ships. I want a hole big enough for the Gnosis to get through and hit their destroyer.”
Alicia wondered if the Gnosis planned on fielding their bombers. All

the ships were in such close proximity, she sort of doubted it. A stray piece of ordnance held the potential to cause a lot of havoc for both sides. Best to stick to their surgical method: destroy the fighters, let the capital ship do its thing, go home alive.

"Break!" Dennis shouted.

It felt like someone detached the leash and Alicia hit her afterburners, plunging headlong toward the enemy. Her wingman was drafted from Raptor, a man named Roman Mallard. He proved to be a decent enough flyer but he leaned toward a *by the book* mentality. That was somewhat contrary to Alicia's style.

Having grown up flying in an air show, she tended more toward fancy, fast maneuvers. Roman couldn't keep up during simulation practice, no matter how hard he tried. This operation was no exception and he got on her com, complaining loudly about her sudden departure.

"How are we supposed to back each other up?"

"Relax," Alicia said. "Follow my course and mop up what I miss. I've got your back, Roman. Have I ever let you down in simulation?"

"Yes!" Roman grunted. "Remember the time that you used me for bait?"

"I promised to never do that again," Alicia replied. "Come on now, I'm about to engage."

Two enemy ships turned in her direction, racing to meet her head on. Alicia dipped her chin, finger poised over the trigger. She counted heart beats under her breath, forcing herself to remain calm throughout the charge. A countdown appeared on her HUD, a descending number showing the rapidly plunging distance.

"And … now!" Alicia pulled the trigger, a combination of mass driving cannons and beam weapons. The one to the left banked and pulled away but the one on the right didn't react quickly enough, taking the full brunt of her attack. Their shields flared and the front of their ship caught fire, globes of orange spilling out of the hole.

It began to tumble, firing wildly as it did so. Alicia climbed, banking hard to the left in an effort to avoid their parting shot. Roman cried out, an inarticulate noise which terminated in a lot of profanity. Alicia

checked her scanner and noted he was still alive, his ship perfectly intact and operational.

"You okay?" Alicia asked.

"Hardly! Did you see what that maniac just tried to do?"

The enemy ship exploded, debris launching in every direction. "He's dead now. Relax."

"You're far too casual about all this!"

Alicia chuckled as she got on her other target's tail, letting the computer grab a lock. "I get that a lot." Tone buzzed over the speakers and she fired, grazing their shields as they bucked to the right at the very last second. *Wily*. A proximity alarm went off. She climbed and rolled, narrowly avoiding another fighter that tried to ram her. Leveling out, she dodged an attack and dove under a massive chunk of debris before bursting free into open space again. Alicia engaged her com to speak to all the fighters. "Attention, they're trying to ram people out here so be careful. I'm not sure how they think it's a good exchange to pull that shit … but there you go."

Alicia glanced over in time to witness Raptor Four, Marge Kingston, eject right as one of the enemy fighters barreled into her side. The two ships exploded but only one of the pilots survived. *These guys are nuts! They value the equipment over the flyers.* "Roman, let's link back up." She tapped her screen and input rendezvous coordinates. "I painted an area."

"I'm a little busy," Roman said, "but I'll try."

Scans indicated he was facing off three enemies. Alicia moved to intercept, engaging her afterburners again. She flew through several mini conflicts, mostly between the Earth fighters and the Tol'An. The Pahxin were on the opposite side of their battlefield, engaged in their own dense conflict.

She watched Roman pull a flip and dart away from his attackers, sliding around their attacks like it was easy. The way he grunted and carried on over the com suggested it was not and he put everything he had into the action. "I'm with you," Alicia announced. "I'll try to even the odds."

Tilting her nose, Alicia fired a missile well out in front of the

attackers. The missile sought a lock and started chasing one of them. He broke formation and tried to escape, pushing his ship to full throttle. The Tol'An fighter's engines glowed as the missile kept after it, gaining ground ever so slightly.

Alicia ignored that one and directed her attention at the next target. Blasting away with mass drivers, she tried to warn him off. He didn't react to her attack, instead firing at Roman who immediately climbed to avoid the beams. The blast grazed his shields, but they seemed to hold.

"These two are serious," Alicia said, falling in behind the other one. She got tone and fired her beams, this time catching her target directly in the rear. The shields flared, and one of the two engines flickered before going out. "One's hurt at least." It veered off and she redirected to the other.

"I've got this!" Roman flipped around suddenly and went head on with the final target. He opened up with all of his weapons, blasting the nose of the target. His opponent did the same, diving just a moment before they collided. The enemy started to smoke then tumbled away. His reactor went up a second later.

"I've got minor damage," Roman reported. "My left thrusters are acting up."

"Okay, we should probably fall back until your automated—" Alicia paused as her computer started warning her. An enemy had her tail and was getting a lock. She spun the ship in a barrel roll, hitting the breaks and dropping low. Her pursuer, the one who had been chased by the missile, flew by overhead. "You little ass!"

Alicia gave chase, flying into the midst of several other enemies as she gave chase. Firing her weapons, she scored some opportunistic hits but nothing that actually took anyone out. Her focus seemed to be heading back toward his capital ship, fleeing again to avoid the fight. *Oh, you're not getting away*.

"Alicia, come back!" Roman shouted. "There are way too many of them over there."

Damn it! Alicia checked her scanner and noted enemy density had increased. She broke off her pursuit and dashed back toward the

others, catching a couple blasts along the way. Her shields held though they dropped down to forty percent on her starboard side. *That was exceptionally insane. I'll be avoiding that one in the future*.
"I'm forming up on you, Roman. We'll have to rendezvous with the rest of Mustang to make any headway though. There really are a lot of them out here!"
"Follow my signature and we'll make it happen from here," Roman replied. "The others are on their way."
"Okay, let's hope it's the final push. The Tol'An seem a little more desperate than usual today."

***

Vincent joined Desmond on the bridge, taking over operational command of the fighters in the field. The Gnosis moved into position, attacking the nearest destroyer. Their beam weapons cut a swath of destruction through the battlefield of smaller ships, annihilating the few that were too slow to get out of the way.
The destroyer took a full barrage on their port side. Salina reported minimal damage to the hull, but the shields dropped down to twenty percent. *That wasn't bad,* Vincent thought. *A couple more of those and we should be able to take down the target. I'd like us to be a little closer though. The fighters need to make a harder push*.
He got on the com with Dennis Arden. "You really need to open a path for us, guys. We scored a good hit but they're maneuvering to stay away. If they keep showing us a different side, this will be a prolonged fight that we can't afford."
"Understood," Dennis said. "We're reforming for another push. It's been pretty crazy out here, sir. I'm sure you're aware."
"I am. Do what you can."
Defensive turrets were working overtime, fending off a swarm of fighters that broke through their three squadrons. All together, they could do some appreciable damage if they were allowed to coordinate but fortunately, the cannons kept them in constant motion. The Gnosis suddenly shook violently.

“What the hell was that?” Desmond asked.
“One of our turrets has been destroyed,” Salina said. “Looks like it was a series of missiles.”
“Pull back one of the fighter squadrons,” Desmond said. “Get those guys off of us. I don’t want another incident like that. If they can get through to one of those, they can target generators. If they got shield emitters, we’d be in some real trouble.”
Vincent got on the com, this time connecting with Anna Jager. “I need you to bring Charger back to the ship and fend off these bogies. They’re all over us and just took down one of the defensive batteries. ETA to getting here?”
“We’d have to disengage,” Anna replied. “Three minutes.”
Vincent gritted his teeth. Three minutes in a fight could equal eternity, the difference between victory and defeat with the right set of circumstances. “Make it two if you can. Hurry.”
“I broke the code!” Dulain shouted, clapping his hands. “I’ve got the message that traitor bastard sent off to his Tol’An friends! Ha!”
Desmond shook his head. “Glad to hear it but I’m not sure it matters at this particular moment.”
Dulain didn’t seem to catch the last part of the captain’s comment. “I checked the cameras in that tech lab and he did manage to clear them out so we don’t have a good view of them. However, the message is damning. He sent it straight to a Tol’An outpost, giving the coordinates we would be visiting and letting them know his upgrade was successful.”
“He shouldn’t have been able to update our system without us knowing,” Salina said. “Do you have records of how he pulled that off?”
“Yes,” Dulain replied. “He went into your tracking system and approved it, then buried the request deep in the archives. Any sort of automatic auditing wouldn’t have seen anything wrong because all records were appropriate. He even managed to replicate the engineer’s signature. This man knew his business.”
The ship shook as the destroyer took a shot at them, energy weapons hammering the shields. Vincent turned to his com and reached out to

Mustang again. “How’re you guys doing?”
“The best I can say is we’re working on them,” Dennis replied. “I can’t talk just now.”
The line stayed open but even looking at the scanners, it was clear the fighters were up to their ears in conflict. Vincent checked the other stations on the ship. Turrets were working overtime, but Anna’s wing managed to engage them. Unfortunately, she seemed to be a ship down. *What happened?*
He checked the logs but didn’t see any call out of someone being shot down. *That ship must’ve been in the middle of a fight and couldn’t break off. I hope they’re with the other wings*. Their target, the destroyer, seemed to be moving toward them, plowing into the battlefield where the fighters were engaged. *That could get messy*.
“Captain,” Vincent said, “are you seeing this?”
“I am,” Desmond replied. “And their people aren’t getting out of the way. If we have ours disengage, they’ll be at a dramatic disadvantage but they'll risk being rammed. Tell them to do what they can about a tactical retreat. Meanwhile, Zach, hit that thing again. I don’t need them moving to point-blank range.”
“I’m initiating evasive maneuvers,” Zach said. “Trying to get us in a better position to stop them from angling their defenses. If it weren’t for that, I swear I’d have disabled them by now. They’re far more maneuverable than the other ships of that size we’ve encountered. Either the crew is being jostled around like popcorn or they have incredible inertial dampeners.”
“Probably a combination of both.” Vincent squinted at the viewscreen. “Looks like the Pahxin are having a serious run over there.”
Desmond nodded. “If I didn’t know Ulian was in charge over there, I’d be nervous. That’s quite the exchange. I can’t believe they’re practically right on top of each other, blasting away. Not a tactic I’d like to employ but the Pahxin definitely have their own views on space combat … They’ve been doing it long enough.”

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Chapter 11

Ulian Hataran led the Pahxin attack group to secure the quiet sector long before the Gnosis was expected to arrive. They emerged from hyperspace and found the place totally empty with only a couple of dead planets nearby and not a single life form within a thousand light years.

A perfect place for this little exercise.

At that point, he settled in for what they all figured would be little more than a relaxing and boring wait. When the Gnosis arrived, no one should've known it would be on its way. They'd immediately set course for Earth and head out. Depending on whether or not they succeeded at their mission, they may or may not have optimized the return visit.

When the Tol'An emerged less than half an hour before the Gnosis did, Ulian immediately knew there had to be treachery involved. So few people knew the coordinates of where they were going and once the Pahxin fleet arrived, all communications were put on blackout. No messages came in or went out.

Which meant something happened back on Earth. Whether it was because a human managed to be turned or one of the many Pahxin happened to be a zealot didn't matter. The truth was they now had an attack force to contend with before their allies arrived.

Ulian figured they had plenty of time to take care of the criminals but when the Gnosis jumped in, he understood just how deep the betrayal went. Not only had someone revealed their coordinates but they sabotaged the Gnosis as well to ensure they arrived sooner than they should've.

Had the Pahxin fleet been delayed in anyway, the Gnosis would've emerged to contend with an overwhelming attack force bent on *claiming* their ship rather than destroying it. Those who survived such a conflict would not have done so for long and more importantly, the enemy would've had four Orbs in their possession.

If the traitor had not been killed already, they would have been facing

a death sentence for sure.
Ulian held his fleet back until the Tol'An approached them. All communications were jammed, they couldn't call in reinforcements but that may not have worked to the Pahxin advantage. If the terrorists couldn't report in, more may come. However, the force they sent shouldn't take too long to deal with.
The first two scouts that drew close to the Pahxin were destroyed immediately, dropping the force down to ten. Just before the Gnosis arrived, they took out two of the destroyers leaving a couple scouts, three destroyers and two battleships, the latter of which seemed disinclined to engage them, even when provoked with some missile fire.
"Get our bombers out there," Ulian ordered. "I want them going well around the battlefield to harass those larger ships. Give them a taste of some real firepower. If we bloody their noses enough, they might leave."
Morala Creldan, Ulian's first officer, complied with the order, coordinating with the hangar. Their pilots were making short work of the Tol'An flyers but he noted just how many the terrorists fielded. It was unusual for them to commit such a large force, even for highly desirable targets.
When the bastards took one of their shipyards, they did so with a single assault vessel and a lot of audacity.
"Bombers are en route," Morala said. "I've got fighter escort on them."
Ulian nodded. "Give me a report on the Gnosis."
"They're holding their own over there, facing a single destroyer at the moment." Morala hummed. "They are being swarmed by fighters which seem to be attempting to take out their turret defenses."
"Likely to conduct a boarding action." Ulian rubbed his chin. "Get Arnik over there with his ship. Get them backup." *Forgive me, Captain Bradford. It's not that I don't trust your abilities but I don't want to risk those devices. Besides, we're here to escort you, not watch you fight a battle you shouldn't have been subjected to*.
The sheer number of civilians they had aboard worried Ulian. That's how a traitor got involved, he was sure of it. More importantly

though, those innocent people were caught up in a real conflict and some of them had likely never experienced such a thing up close and personal. They definitely deserved for the fight to be over quickly … with an outcome favorable to them.

One of the destroyers closed in, making a mad dash toward the Stalwart. Two of the Pahxin destroyers moved to intercept, blasting it in a devastating crossfire. The attack caused massive damage but the vessel kept moving. Enough of it remained intact that it acted as a missile, definitely capable of some serious damage.

Ulian turned to Erda Walar, their pilot. “Do you have this?”

“Relax,” Erda replied. The engines and the Stalwart darted backwards just as the weapons discharged. Beams cut through the approaching ship, tearing the hull in half. As the blasted pieces burst in separate directions, the core exploded, obliterating the engines and cargo bays. “See? No problem.”

“Uh huh.” Ulian shook his head. He checked the log and noted the ship would’ve collided with them inside of thirty seconds had Erda not performed his move. “Some might say you like to cut things too close.”

“I had to make sure I had a good angle to stop it from advancing on us,” Erda replied. “It was faster after all … at least while we’re flying on forward thrusters.”

“Understood.” Ulian exchanged a look with Morala. “That’s another one down. What’ve we got left?”

“The battleships are still out there,” Morala said. “The destroyer the Gnosis is fighting with, another destroyer our scouts are taking care of … They’ve got it down to thirty percent hull integrity and their scouts … which seem to be fleeing the system.”

“What?” Ulian scowled. “We can’t let them get away. Erda, get us moving. Can we catch up to them?”

“I think so. We’re the only ship that can easily disengage either way.” Erda paused. “Yes, they’re fast but their strength is in maneuverability, not necessarily speed. We can fire in … three minutes.”

“Okay.” Ulian turned to Viran Des, his communications and technical

officer. “Inform the other ships of our intentions.” He paused as a thought came to him. “Erda, plot a course so that as we come on those scouts, we’ll be directly in line with the Gnosis. I want to help out. If we can buy them some breathing space, they can hyperspace out of here while we mop up.”
“On it sir.”
You do not need to be involved in a meaningless conflict, Ulian thought. *I only hope the honorable Captain Bradford will accept this plan*.

***

Anna couldn’t pull up in time, flying straight through the explosion of a fighter she took out. The debris burned up on contact with her shields and her alarm went off, showing her defenses had dropped below fifty percent. The dogfight left her covered in sweat, especially since it happened so close to the Gnosis.
The fighters harassing their home diverted their attention from the turrets to take on Charger Squadron but the initial battle proved they weren’t up to the task. They sent more than enough to be a problem and after Anna’s team took out five of them, they still faced ten ships, meaning they faced over two to one odds.
Flight Lieutenant Frank Maze, her second, formed up beside her for just a moment before he was driven off and below the Gnosis. She gave chase, putting herself directly on the enemy’s six. Firing two blasts, she caught their side but their shields saved them. They spun suddenly, firing their own blasts that connected with Anna’s front shields.
Her target continued spinning, not righting itself as it hurtled off away from the fight. *Pilot probably passed out or maybe even died when they tried that move*. Anna checked her defenses and frowned. She was down to thirty percent shields and the generators were having a hard time catching up. *I need less than a minute to recover!*
“You okay?” Frank asked.
“Not entirely,” Anna replied. “You?”
An explosion interrupted them, a gigantic flash from behind. They

checked their scanners and found another two enemies were down. This left them with seven ships to take out, seven more zealots to worry about. And those remaining few became desperate, returning their attention to the Gnosis.

Crap, I bet these idiots are planning on ramming the ship! "You thinking what I'm thinking, Frank?"

"Christ … Yeah, they're going to pull their suicide BS."

"Okay." Anna clicked over to the open channel. "Team, hold nothing back at all. Those Tol'An maniacs are going to try to collide with the Gnosis in rapid succession. If they do, we all know how much damage that can cause. It's up to us to put them down *before* that happens. Do *not* let them succeed! Go!"

Anna and Frank went after the closest ship, the one that seemed like it had the best chance to make contact. They didn't wait for tone, leading their target and firing beams and cannons at the same time. Heat warnings popped up on Anna's console, but she ignored it as her target's shields began to flare.

They cut through and took him out so that only debris scattered on the Gnosis shields. *Scratch one. I can't believe there are six left.*

She watched Charger Three and Four blast away at some of theirs, catching one in such a way that it tumbled, slamming into its companion. They were flying too close together and the resulting crash ended with a massive explosion as both cores went off. The proximity to their ultimate target meant the Gnosis probably felt the concussion.

Four to go! Anna noted that one was nearly there. She hit her afterburners, cranking all shields to double front. Firing her weapons, she hit them with a full barrage on the side, barely knocking them off course. They skimmed the Gnosis shields, catching fire and exploding a moment later.

I thought for sure I was going to have to ram that bastard. Thank God that worked without my own near suicidal run.

"Can you not do that again?" Frank asked. "Seriously, there's no need for those kinds of heroics. There are only three to go …" He paused. "Sorry, two. Missile worked."

“Shit! He turned on me!” Lieutenant Preston Everest shouted.
“Ejecting! Ejecting!” His fighter exploded a moment later as the Tol’An pilot raced off toward the destroyer, hitting his afterburners.
One left, Anna thought. *What a cheap bastard.* “Preston, are you okay?”
“Yes, ma’am. Life pod is intact and I’m uninjured. Sorry about that …”
“Don’t you even dare say that. We’ll get you soon.” Anna focused on the last ship as it evaded Frank’s attacks, still plunging toward the Gnosis. She tried as well but the flyer proved wily, narrowly escaping more energy beams and cannons. It seemed inevitable that it would get through and connect.
Damn it! That’s going to really hurt!
“Come on, guys! Anyone?”
Turrets came to life, blasting away and obliterating the pilot less than a few hundred meters from target. Anna slumped in her seat and let out a deep breath. “Wow … That was entirely too close.”
“No doubt,” Frank said. “At least we put it in the—”
He was interrupted by an explosion and Anna looked in time to see his fighter torn out of the sky by the Tol’An who seemingly ran away. Her eyes blazed as the bastard started to move off again, hitting his afterburners. *Oh no, you’re not going anywhere!* Anna swallowed hard, moving to intercept.
“Check on Frank,” Anna ordered the others. “I’ve got this guy. See … See if he made it.”
“He … didn’t, ma’am,” Flying Officer Jonny Calloway reported the news. “I saw it happen.”
Anna bit her lip before replying. “Remain there on standby and protect the Gnosis. I’ll be back in a moment.”
The enemy led her into the fray where Mustang and Raptor engaged in dramatic dogfights. She had to dodge debris, fly over chunks of metal and through gunfire but she wasn’t letting this bastard go. No matter how wily he tried to be, she remained hot on his tail, ever closing the distance between them.
Her computer lit up, indicating she had range for beam weapons. Anna chose to close the distance some more so she could let them have both mass drivers as well. This would be a real coup de grace,

one that he wouldn't be ejecting from or escaping. It climbed and she followed, chasing it into the hulk of a burned out destroyer.
Anna focused, jogging the stick to avoid pipes and solid sections that would've ended her in an instant. The other pilot made it out, flying through the remains of the engine and she was right behind them, climbing just as they did. She got a lock, pulling the trigger. Blasts smacked the shields but they held.
Guns went next, making tiny flares across the hull but still, his defenses remained up. *Okay, fine, you've doubled up the rear? Take this.* Anna fired her final missile and it lurched ahead of her, closing on the target. He needed to divert power from the shields if he hoped to outrun it but if he did, she'd be able to shoot him.
He made the choice, pulling away from the missile. Anna fired immediately, cutting through one of his engines. He tried to veer to the right and the missile caught him in the center, obliterating him in an instant. *I'm sorry he got you, Frank. The bastard paid for it*. The victory felt empty but necessary.
I have to get back to the Gnosis. The fighting around her became more intense and her shields still hadn't fully recovered. *This was probably an ill-advised move.* Anna pulled away from the fighting, climbing above it before changing course and heading back for the Gnosis as fast as she could.
She established a com link to the Gnosis. "Commander Bowman. Your bogeys are taken care of. You're clear."
"Thank you, Anna. Do you have a status?"
"We're down two ships." Anna swallowed hard as emotion threatened to grip her. She mastered herself and cleared her throat. "Flight Lieutenant Frank Maze is gone. Preston needs search and rescue."
"Understood." Bowman replied after a pause. "Thank you, Anna. I'm sorry … about Frank. You guys did a great job."
Doesn't feel like it right now, Anna thought. She'd flown with Frank for a long time. His end felt strange to her, unbelievable. And yet, Jonny saw it. She didn't look forward to the moment that sank in. It would be a bad day indeed.

***

Desmond watched as the destroyer continued to draw closer. Zach hit it with everything they had, tearing through the initial defenses. *They're not going to ram us*, he thought. *They want our cargo too badly. They have to disable the ship if they hope to walk away with those Orbs however …*

Something else dawned on him. If they couldn't have the Orbs, then depriving their enemies of them might be the next best thing. The battle clearly wasn't going in their favor and the Tol'An had given themselves a reputation for suicide. "Zach … We need to stay in motion. I'm not interested in these guys trying to dock with our faces."

"I'm moving," Zach replied, hitting them with the weapons again. "The fighters aren't bothering us anymore, so that's a plus. But this guy … He must have some serious shield generators. The last one we fought would've gone down by now. This is uncanny … and really strange."

Vincent turned to Desmond. "Apparently, a couple scouts were trying to get away. The Stalwart chased them down and finished them off. They're coming toward us now."

"We've got some more backup coming as well," Zach said. "A Pahxin destroyer. I'm coordinating with their weapon crews right now."

"Good." Desmond checked the scanner on his console, noting that no one else had arrived in the system, not yet at least. How long would it take for the Tol'An to muster reinforcements and get them there? He figured if anyone showed up, it would be too late. They'd arrive to salvage the hulks of their attack force.

"Captain Bradford." Ulian's voice came in through the speakers. "I see you've met one of the Tol'An's latest technological experiments. They seem to have forsaken heavy weapons in exchange for additional defenses. It allows them the opportunity to ram smaller ships and survive. Or close on a larger vessel without being destroyed prior to their collision."

"We've noticed," Desmond replied. "They seem to have given up guns."

“Because the only vessels left are their battleships and them,” Ulian said. “But I don’t think they’re going to sacrifice their larger resources today. Not when it’s obvious they’ve lost this conflict. We’re almost there. Stay away from that ship and you should be fine.”

“Like hell I’m going to be saved,” Zach said. He tapped away at his console, sending another massive barrage at the enemy destroyer. Missiles, beam weapons and cannons battered their hull, this time getting through the weaker shields on the starboard side. “Finally!” Tiny orange dots appeared across the metal, bits of flame bursting out.

“Did you do it?” Vincent asked.

“Hurt him,” Zach said, “but he’s still coming. Lord, these guys do not know when to stop!”

The Pahxin destroyer burst onto the scene, tearing into the rear flank of the Tol’An vessel. Zach fired again as well and they hit it from both sides. The attacking vessel continued its forward momentum, intent on connecting with the Gnosis. Zach hit the thrusters, dropping them down.

The Tol’An didn’t seem to be able to maneuver. *Maybe they put all their efforts into the thrusters*. Weapons fire tapped the top shields of the Gnosis, cutting through and hitting the hull. The whole ship trembled for a moment. Salina’s hands raced over her console. “Damage in hangar two and minor damage to networking on decks three and five.”

Zach spun them around, a quick enough maneuver that everyone on the bridge had to hold on. Just when it became uncomfortable, it stopped suddenly, causing another jostle. He fired their weapons, tearing through the engines of the Tol’An ship. Each of them went dark and the ship began to drift in a diagonal pattern.

The three ally ships hit it again, this time together. It only took one pass before the destroyer was turned into molten debris, pieces of the ship making a hazard for smaller ships.

Desmond leaned back in his chair. “Salina, what’re those battleships doing?”

“They appear to be bugging out. And they’re leaving their fighters behind!”

“Pays to be in their military,” Zach muttered.
“Seems to be about ten left,” Vincent said. “Mop up won’t take long. I think we’re good.”
“I’m glad that at least part of our preparations paid off.” Desmond stood up. “If the Pahxin hadn’t arrived here early, we would’ve hopped right into a trap. We have plenty to do, a lot to look into before we can go home and we need to do it fast. Vincent, are those enemy fighters engaged with our people?”
Vincent shook his head. “No, that’s all Pahxin conflict over there.”
“Okay, recall our fighters and get search and rescue out there for the downed pilots. I think we lost three, right?”
“Yes, sir. I’m on it.”
“Ulian’s on the line again, sir,” Salina said.
“Put it on screen.” Desmond waited until the man’s face appeared. “Thanks for the assist, Captain. I appreciate it.”
“Of course. We will finish off the fighters out there and secure the area. It appears you have some minor damage to tend to, but we should plan to be out of here within the next two hours. I would recommend plotting a course back right away. Consequently, how did you arrive so fast?”
“The traitor who gave the Tol’An these coordinates also upgraded our navigation program.”
“Interesting tactic.” Ulian scowled. “I would have Doctor Rindala look at that upgrade and ensure it was done properly.”
“We will, thank you.”
“I will contact you again later when things have calmed down. Ulian out.”
Desmond turned to Dulain as the screen went dark. “So … what did you discover?”
“Our traitor must’ve had a schematic of the ship. He understood *exactly* where to go and what cameras to clear to cover his tracks all the way from the research lab to the computer he used to upgrade the navigation system. Consequently, that’s where he sent the message from as well.”
Vincent said, “I’m guessing he grabbed the information from Gamma

Alpha during his brief visit. We'll need to make sure he didn't grab anything else while he was there."
"The man's still alive," Dulain said. "Christina subdued him. We should be able to interrogate anything we need out of him. Maybe this will work to our advantage though … We'll need to be quick about it. The Pahxin like to execute people like him from what I understand. They have a zero tolerance policy on treason."
"I don't really blame them," Desmond said. He turned to Vincent who was practically an avatar of tension. He knew exactly why. "I'll take over for you and oversee the return of our fighters. Go down and check on Cassie."
"Are you sure?" Vincent asked. "I can wait …"
"I want to know how she is too." Desmond gestured for the door. "Go."
"Thank you." Vincent nearly darted for the door and departed a moment later.
"He truly cares," Dulain said. "I hadn't expected that."
"I doubt he did either." Desmond sat down. "Salina, talk to Thayne about checking the navigation system and get me a repair estimate from Webber. Ulian's timeline seemed reasonable but I want to get some concrete answers before we commit to it. Mister Dulain, I think you can go if you'd like."
"I wouldn't mind staying on to help, if it's all the same to you. Once we're ready to go, I'll find my agents and get a debriefing but until then, you seem to be down a couple of people."
"I won't say no. Alright folks, stand down from battle stations and begin the recovery process."

***

Dennis and his team received the order to return to the ship. Charger and Raptor went first and his team formed up. Half way back, his com started blinking, an incoming request from one of the Pahxin fighters. He switched the call to a private channel and established the connection.

“This is Arden, go ahead.”
“Good day.” Dennis smiled. He wondered when he’d hear from Dala Ahnshyr again. “I heard you were given an order to return to base.”
“Yes, apparently we’re done over here.” Dennis paused. “You guys are on mop up, aren’t you?”
“Indeed.” Dala paused. “Sorry, finished one off. I wondered if you would rather come join us for the final push.”
Dennis considered her offer. “I don’t know … I mean … I guess I could … if it was somewhat urgent. As in you felt like you needed the help? If you understand my meaning.”
“Yes, to get around your orders, of course.” Dala cleared her throat. “Please, Mister Arden. We require your aid. Can you break formation to assist?”
“I can’t turn down an ally’s request for help,” Dennis replied. “Be there in just a moment.” He switched to his public com. “Team, I’ve been requested by the Pahxin fighters to give them a little help. I’ll see you back on the ship. Shane, you’re in charge. Be sure everyone lands safely.”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Shane switched to a private channel. “What the hell, buddy?”
“Sorry, man. Can’t turn them down.” Dennis smirked. “It won’t be long.”
“They’re mopping that shit up. What could they possibly need you for?”
“Shane …” Dennis sighed. “Just … get back to the ship, huh? Seriously, it’s all good.”
“Whatever. We’ll talk about it when you get back. If you do.” Shane killed the connection and Dennis broke formation, heading back toward the fray.
He kicked on his afterburners to close the distance, rushing toward the flashes of light and mild chaos going on out there. There must’ve been at least thirty Pahxin fighters tearing through the remainder of the Tol’An ships that had been stranded when their battleships departed the system.
Near the edge of the battle, his com lit up, a message from the Gnosis

bridge. Dennis clicked it on, clearing his throat before answering. "This is Arden."

"Hello," Salina said. "I couldn't help but notice you were not docking with the ship. Care to explain?"

"A request for aid from our Pahxin allies, ma'am. I had to answer the call."

"I see. Interesting. I'm sure they didn't need the help." Salina hummed. "Good luck and do try to hurry back. Our goal is to leave the system as quickly as possible. There may be reinforcements incoming."

"Totally understood. Arden out." He clicked off the com, shaking his head. *Everyone's got opinions*. Disengaging the afterburners, he dipped down to engage the closest enemy, a Tol'An fighter flying erratically. It bounced around like an enraged bee, pulling maneuvers that should've knocked the pilot out. He wondered if the controls had been damaged, sending the ship into the wild motions. The pilot could've been dead but if he wasn't, if he had managed to survive, he could still be a reasonable threat.

Targeting him proved to be a real pain. Every time the computer indicated tone, it moved in a seemingly random direction. Dennis finally fired without it, trying to lead the target. The first two tries missed but he scored on the third, cutting right through the side of it. *No shields. That thing's already taken a lot of damage*.

Dala's fighter flew in front of him, blasting his target into bits. "Firing at the left overs?" Dala asked. "Come on, Arden. Get into a real fight."

"Wow, you're out of control." Dennis adjusted to avoid running into her and formed up on her wing. She led them straight into the middle of a dogfight, dodging a series of beam attacks before coming up on the tail of one of the enemies. She started shooting, tearing at her enemy's shields.

Dennis took a more pragmatic approach, pulling up before he entered the wild brawl. Spinning around, he targeted from the edge of the conflict and fired from the safer vantage point. One of the Pahxin ships exploded not even a hundred yards from him and another was severely damaged.

Jesus, our allies are insane! Dennis flipped around, avoiding some debris as he attempted to gain a good solution on a target. The Tol'An bolted for the edge of the fighting, dropping under a piece of one of the scout vessels and hitting his afterburners. *Where exactly does he think he's going?*

Dennis followed, spinning to avoid a drifting bit of junk and increasing speed in an effort to catch up. Flashes behind him illuminated his cockpit, explosions of various ships. The Pahxin definitely were winning but they acted entirely too casually for his taste. Yes, it was a mop up but that didn't mean go crazy.

The debris density increased and he had to concentrate, dodging to the left to avoid a chunk of engine then dove to fly through the burned out core of the thrusters. As he emerged, he looked around, spotting his target some distance off well away from the action. Adjusting course, he gave chase.

Proximity alerts went off and he spun to the right, narrowly avoiding a missile. Three more Tol'An converged on his position, moving in to get on his six. "Um … Holy crap." He hit his afterburners and turned back toward the debris field, hoping that he might be able to even the odds. "Dala, I've got a bit of a problem."

"You left the battlefield?" She asked. "What has happened?"

"Seems the Tol'An decided to keep some fighters in reserve out here. I chased one into a trap. There are four fighters out here … Four on one, basically. Any chance for some help?"

"Continue on your present course back toward us. We will come to you right now." Dala cleared her throat. "I bet you wish you would have boarded your vessel. My apologies for dragging you into so much danger. The Tol'An deserve some credit for being far cleverer than they ever are."

So glad I get to see them be unique first hand, Dennis thought. He continued dodging, moving as erratically as he dared while maintaining full speed. The Tol'An chipped away at his shields, glancing blows with beam weapons lowering their integrity a couple percent every few moments.

At thirty-percent shields, he made it to the debris and flew in,

immediately ducking behind the largest bit of rubbish he could find. Putting that between him and his pursuers bought him an ounce of breathing room but he knew it would be short lived. They'd be on him soon and they didn't care about bumping into things.

Their shields can survive it. A missile struck a piece of metal nearby, casting bits in every direction. Dennis's shields held but tiny fireflies of orange appeared across his right side. Another attack destroyed more of the ship parts around him, which put them into motion. He flipped the ship to the side, fitting through a narrow gap.

This shit is more of Alicia's thing! Sweat covered his entire body as he dove into another section of the blown-out hulk and desperately looked for the way out. A small gap off to the left seemed large enough but he wasn't sure. Heading in that direction, he fired his weapons, making the hole bigger. His top shields lit up as he burst back into open space.

Way too close! "Dala!" Dennis shouted. "Where are you guys?"

The Tol'An followed through the opening he made and they all started firing at once. The first two attacks missed but the third caught his shields, dropping them to twenty percent. His computer went crazy, lighting up every alarm it seemed to have. *If you weren't wasting energy warning me, maybe you could recharge them!*

Seven Pahxin fighters appeared in front of him. "Fly straight," Dala warned as they all opened up. Their attacks tore into the Tol'An, ripping them to pieces. Dennis slowed down, slumping in his seat and taking a deep, calming breath. "Do you feel alive now, Arden? You must admit this was worth it."

"Must I?" Dennis asked. "You might be too high speed for me, Dala."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, we'll talk about it when we're not in fighters," Dennis replied.

"Are we done out here? Have we mopped up the fighters?"

"We just need to conduct a final sweep so search and rescue can do their part of things. Thank you for joining us. We'll speak again on Earth."

"Hopefully on the ground," Dennis replied. He set course back for the ship, glad to be heading home. He'd had enough excitement for one

trip … or even a lifetime if he was to be honest. The rest of the ship likely agreed. *Time to get back and find out.*

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Epilogue

Damage to the Gnosis was minor and they were able to put some temporary repairs in place to make the trip back. Desmond met with Chief Webber about the hyperdrive and found that Brexan had performed a proper and solid upgrade to their system. Thayne and Harper both looked it over and approved.

I guess they thought they'd be adding our ship to their fleet so why not?

The prisoner was sequestered from others at Dulain's insistence. He wanted Pahxin intelligence to be involved in the interrogation process back on Earth. Until then, they simply made sure he was safe and secure, especially since some of the civilians on board wanted a go at him.

He hadn't made any friends when he rushed out of the research lab. Cassie, Heat and Gil proved to be fine but none of them had much of a chance to talk before they grabbed Zach and Salina, disappearing into one of the tech labs. There, they used the star charts to identify where the other Orbs were. Intelligence would have to gather more data about those areas though they believed the Pahxin would likely already know.

Once they returned home, they'd share the information and make a plan as to how to retrieve them.

The Pahxin escorts sent half their number ahead to secure Sol while the others remained behind for the Gnosis to finish their repairs. The Stalwart would be the last ship out of the system to ensure everyone got out okay. Desmond appreciated Ulian's style and felt as if they had a great deal in common.

His experience outweighs mine but we approach this from a similar place.

After they identified the location of two of the Orbs, Gil and Thayne were able to state why the two held by the Tol'An didn't show up. Each device had the capacity to go dark, essentially hiding from the others. They couldn't explain why they had such a function but it made sense.

Unfortunately, that meant they couldn't assault the main headquarters

of the terrorists right away but Harper offered a theory that four of the Orbs together may be enough to identify the last two regardless of if they were defying search. This made retrieving the final ones all the more important.
Earth and Pahxin authorities would make them a top priority.
A course was set for Earth and this time, the optimization suggested they would be there in less than ten hours. It staggered Desmond that the calculations were so much better, that they had the capacity for such efficiency the whole time but hadn't tapped into it. They would need to speak to their allies about any other adjustments which could be made.
Especially considering time was of the essence.
Desmond arrived on the bridge, waiting for all stations to report ready for hyperspace. They would be home soon and when they arrived, their next mission would likely already be planned. He figured the next time out would be far more eventful, which was saying a lot when he thought about all they faced on what should've been a boring flight.
Space proved to be far more of an adventure than even he anticipated when he first signed up to command the Gnosis. He wondered how much different things would be when they defeated the Tol'An and were able to get to the whole point of the ship in the first place: exploration.
Would it be boring by comparison? Something told him it would never be slow. There would always be challenges but hopefully, they wouldn't be trying to shoot him. That much he could trade in and never look back.

***

Heat met with Captain Gabriel after he finished being interrogated by the scientists about the device that would let them interface with the Orb. He thought he might've gotten a pass when he woke up but instead, they immediately took him in to identify star systems and work on drawing up schematics.

Then the captain called him into his office and he figured he'd have even more to do.

"Sir." Heat snapped off a clean salute but his body wanted nothing more than to relax. He felt exhausted from his time in the Orb. Emotional fatigue fell over him from the strange memory he relived and once again, he missed his friend. The opportunity to work with him again, even in a dream, was bittersweet.

"Have a seat, Gunny." Gabriel gestured and waited for him to sit down. "I've read the report from Agent Alexander and Doctor Vaedra. Sounds like you three had quite the experience in there. I wanted to ask you point-blank and in person if you're okay. How do you feel about the events you experienced?"

Heat thought about his answer for several moments before letting out a sigh. "I think it was a cruel joke that I was picked for it. Doesn't make a lot of sense to me beyond the whole genetic disposition nonsense. Still got the work done, I guess but … I don't know. There had to be other people on the ship capable of doing it."

"Yes, I've been wondering why it picked you specifically. Hell, it could've ignored the people those scientists wanted in there, but it didn't." Gabriel hummed. "Well, I suppose if you're okay, then it doesn't really matter. Good job in there. I know you weren't awake for it, but I'm sorry I busted your chops."

"Sir?" Heat tilted his head.

"I was shocked you hadn't finished vetting those people and went in to give you a piece of my mind. That's when I found you unconscious."

"Happened when they engaged the experiment," Heat replied. "Knocked me right out. I thought I was having a damn stroke or something."

"I notice you mention that your dream was that mission to retrieve data from those terrorists," Gabriel said. "Pretty hush hush affair all around. I'm glad you didn't mention specific locations. High command probably would've been unhappy. I wasn't aware that Sergeant Gorman went on that mission with you."

Heat nodded. "He and I were part of a team since I was a corporal

when he first joined up. We'd been friends ever since and I … to be honest, I pulled strings to keep us in the same unit. We worked well together and didn't want to break up the band. God's honest truth is he didn't even think about joining the Gnosis, but I pushed him."
"Yeah?"
"It came with a promotion for both of us and a pay increase as well. Besides, it sounded like we were going to be explorers. I kind of thought we could both do with a break from constant ops. We were out in the field nearly every other week, you know? I couldn't remember the last time I took leave."
"We all guessed wrong about the Gnosis project." Gabriel sighed. "I know we already talked about Gorman before but I'd like to say it again. He was a great soldier, a good man and I liked him. When we get back to Earth, you are more than welcome to take some time if you need it. I can arrange to get you off this ship for the next mission."
"No way." Heat shook his head. "I'm ready to do this. There's no chance I'm going to walk away when we're so close to putting it all to bed. Gorman would scoff at me if he were around to hear I needed to some leave over his death. Believe me, we were more about getting the job done than most of our comrades."
"If you're sure, then I won't stand in the way." Gabriel extended his hand. "I'm glad to have you on the team, Geoff. You're a damn fine soldier."
"Thank you, sir." Heat shook his hand. "Um … sir? Permission to speak freely?"
"Go for it."
"I'd really like to get some sleep before we get home," Heat said. "Would you mind if I took myself off roster until then?"
Gabriel chuckled. "Consider it done, son. I'll take care of the forms myself. Get out of here now. I think we've all taken up enough of your time."
Heat headed out and went to his room, collapsing on the bed. He was grateful to have such an understanding CO, a man who got it far better than most people of his stature. Gabriel had been honed in

combat though. He wasn't the typical academy officer. That made him easy to follow.

And a man I can definitely respect. Heat drew a deep breath and looked forward to some *genuine* sleep. *Okay brain, no crazy dreams. I've had enough of those to last me quite a while. In fact, a trip to the Caribbean would be nice. A little sunshine … a couple girls … some drinking … God, I do need a vacation. When this is done … I'll take one.*

***

Cassie checked on Christina who had been admitted to the medical bay. She'd been cut during her fight with Brexan but apparently the wounds were mostly superficial. After chasing the guy down, the brawl in the elevator must've been intense but she came out on top. She proved to be quite the scrapper.

Christina sat on the bed, peering at her tablet. They let her change into casual clothes, a black blouse and a loose-fitting pair of jeans. She looked up as Cassie approached and smiled, looking tired. "Welcome to the invalid club, Agent Alexander. We're all down here recovering from bumps, scrapes, cuts and a few more nasty injuries. How're you?"

"I'm doing well," Cassie replied. "I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable and didn't need anything."

"Maybe you can restrict Dulain from visiting me again?" Christina winked. "He's been down here every half hour making sure I'm okay. It's getting a little annoying."

Cassie chuckled. "I didn't know he cared so much."

"I don't know what his deal is." Christina shrugged, earning herself a wince. "Ouch. That bastard got me on the shoulder with his little knife. It stings like a bitch. I guess they trained him pretty well. Thank God, I happened to be better. That elevator could've been a scary way to end it all."

"I bet." Cassie smiled. "If you need anything, reach out through the com. I'll bring it to you right away, okay?"

"Thanks." Christina narrowed her eyes. "Hey, are you and

Commander Bowman an item?"
"What?" Cassie's eyes widened and her cheeks flushed. "Why … Why would you ask?"
"I've heard some things." Christina's grin widened. "Have you two … you know …"
"I don't know … and I don't think so." Cassie cleared her throat. "I really should go, Agent Dawson."
"Ooh, we're going to use formal address, huh? Is that what gets you guys moving?"
"Lord, you're incorrigible! I'm out."
"See you later, Cassie! Thanks for stopping by!"
Cassie headed for the bridge but paused halfway down the hall. She wasn't on any duty roster and any work she needed to accomplish was already done. Technically, she could relax during their trip home, a concept that dramatically appealed to her after the ordeal she'd been through with the Orb.
Checking her tablet, she noted that Vincent happened to be off for another two hours. She went to his quarters and knocked on the door, clasping her hands behind her back. Movement from within made her smile. She couldn't wait to see him in private. Alone time didn't exist for the first couple hours after she woke up from the Orb.
Attempting the experiment terrified her. When it worked, the sheer disassociation from the present added a new layer to fear. After they got through their respective security dream, things leveled out and she felt confident they finally knew what they were doing but getting there represented the greatest stress of her life.
The door opened and Vincent's face lit up. He stepped forward and drew her into a hug and she melted into him, enjoying the embrace. Her body ached, her mind felt heavy with fatigue but in that moment, relaxing into a moment of affection, she realized she'd found the one thing she needed to conclude the assignment.
A little human interaction, the simplicity of such a basic human desire, fulfilled her. The job gave her purpose, the assignments they tackled challenged her but this, holding Vincent and knowing he was there for her, made all the other activities worth it. As they drew back

and he let her into the room, she looked forward to a little quiet time with him.

After all, they'd likely be thrown right back into action again. They needed to take advantage of any downtime that came along.

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Reclamation: Legacy War Book 6

Humanity has unlocked another secret of the Orbs but it has put them on a collision course with their enemy, the terrorist group known as the Tol'An. As they race to collect another of the powerful devices, they must face another of their enemies, the cold corporate mercenaries known as the Kalrawv Group. Hidden away on an illegal mining facility, their purpose there can only mean one thing: they are trying to take the Orb for themselves.

But Earth has an ally in the Pahxin people and the battleship Stalwart is committed to assisting with the operation. As the two ships depart Earth, they head out to raid a planet which is known for destructive weather patterns. The unstable system holds the powerful secret from a long dead civilization, one which must be collected before either of the nefarious groups get their hands on it.

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Prologue

Ezria Tolva spent hours communing with the Trindisha interface, kneeling before it in solemn prayer. He remained quiet all that time, barely moving and hardly breathing. The wisdom from the device flowed over him, overwhelming him with inspiration. He knew what needed to be done, understood the next steps of their military campaign.

The locations of most of the Trindishas had been revealed and all he needed to do was get them. But who would he entrust with such a mission? His best agent was disgraced, languishing in a cell just down the hall. Tol'An men were loyal unto death but few of them held the sort of creative spark needed in order to pull off a complicated task.

Perhaps it is time that I give him a chance to redeem himself. Ezria did not tell Gizan he would ever receive such a privilege. He allowed the man to wallow in hopelessness, wondering when he might be executed for failing to hold on to the ambassador and human admiral. His failure cost the Tol'An much that day.

An entire base was destroyed, stolen files and countless deaths. After innumerable successes, Gizan finally faltered. And because there was a precedent to maintain, he had to be punished. Ezria felt proud of himself that he managed not to kill the man outright or to order him to commit suicide.

Even in his rage, he recognized he could not burn through talent like that so easily. He realized he might need him again at some point so he saved him, putting him away like a powerful weapon that needed recharging. By the time he freed the man, he would be ready to do anything to take back his name and honor.

That meant more to a man like Gizan than life itself. Even if Ezria had conceived of a suicide mission, he would still find the assassin eager to throw himself into it, anything to be brought back into favor. Rising from his knees, he turned to a nearby guard and motioned for him to follow him.

They paced to Gizan's cell and paused there, allowing the soldier to

unlock the door before pulling it open. Ezria entered the dank, six-by-six cubicle and peered at his fallen champion, a man of great skill reduced to a huddled form on the plank attacked to the wall. I wonder if the beast has been broken.

The assassin wore tattered pants and was bare above the waist. Scars marred his torso, long white lines over his chest and stomach. Ezria knew there were many on his back as well. He'd endured great pain throughout his career. Each mark represented a sacrifice to the cause. His dedication never fell into question until he failed to deliver.

"Will you not kneel before your leader?" Ezria asked.

Gizan slipped off the plank without a word and knelt, keeping his head bowed.

"Very good." Ezria paced inside. "These accommodations are a far cry from the chambers you enjoyed before. After so many successes, so much passion and glory, you have fallen quite far." He clicked his tongue. "My disappointment was complete but what if I told you my anger has been dampened?"

Gizan remained silent.

"I would like to offer you another chance, Gizan. I have a mission which your talents used to be perfect for. Do you believe they could be again?" Ezria glared down at the man. "Do you feel confident that you can succeed after your failure? Do you still have it within you to be the hand of the Tol'An?"

"I do," Gizan replied. "I am ready to carve the enemies of our sect at your command."

"I see." Ezria sighed. "What assurance do I have that you are not a broken animal? A weapon that no longer has a charge?"

"I have cultivated my faith in the dark," Gizan said. "I have focused on my will, hoping for this moment. Now that it is here, I am prepared. Give me a task, I shall accomplish it. Whatever it may be, where I must go, I am yours now and always. Success shall be assured on my life."

"On your life." Ezria hummed. "It's good you brought that up because should you fail me again, I will have you stripped of your flesh. You will be roasted alive while being flayed. Do you understand the

gravity of this situation? My need for you to accomplish this task? The Tol'An's very survival is at stake."
"I understand and accept the possibility that you've described." Gizan finally looked up at him. "You can rely on me. I take full responsibility for the last action, but the circumstances were not in my favor. This time, I will ensure they are. No one will stand in my way. If you unleash me again, then you will not regret it."
"Very well." Ezria turned to the guard. "Allow him to return to his chambers so that he might prepare himself for this mission. I will brief you when you've eaten well and stretched this cell out. You have today and tonight to recover. Tomorrow, we talk and I shall send you out to retrieve another Trindisha. Until then … enjoy your freedom again."
"Thank you, Master," Gizan said.
"Deserve it," Ezria replied. "Make sure you deserve it, Gizan, because there are no third chances with the Tol'An." He left the room, returning to the Trindisha interface where he dropped to his knees. Communing with the devices brought him peace, gave him the confidence to continue the war against the universe. There were many factions which would potentially rise against them. The nefarious Kalrawv Group would be in the way of their success this time. The Pahxin military would never help those scum.
It should be a simple slaughter. Gizan would be hungry enough to slaughter anyone in his path. Those mercenary fools would never stand a chance against true zeal. As his plan came into being, Ezria knew this was but one more step toward their domination of the galaxy … one more motion leading to the cleansing of all filth in the universe.
He relished it.

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Chapter 1

The Gnosis emerged from hyperspace, a short six-hour trip away from Earth. Captain Desmond Bradford let out a deep breath of relief. Scans showed everything was normal so nothing odd happened while they were gone. He looked forward to returning the two Orbs and having them back under lock and key.

When they left, an enemy force attacked Gamma Alpha. They did so while the military attempted to transport the precious Orbs to the Gnosis. Desmond was curious how it turned out and if they had figured out specifically who ordered the assault. Somehow, they coordinated with a Pahxin spy, a Tol'An operative who got on board. There were a lot of questions requiring answers but as far as Desmond's mission was concerned, they'd been successful. They knew where to go next and better, how to interface with the Orbs properly in the future. It required some engineering effort, some construction, but they were well on their way to unlocking the next layer of alien technology.

The Pahxin starship Stalwart jumped into the system shortly after them, sending a message indicating they were fully operational. The two ships set course for Earth's orbit, prepared to report in to high command and begin the next phase of their operations against the Tol'An.

Agent Cassandra Alexander stepped onto the bridge, taking her station. She logged in without a word, but Desmond was far too curious to leave her alone. She'd been through quite the ordeal while they were away, having mentally delved into the Orbs along with Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow and Doctor Gil Vaedra.

The three of them wrote up their reports but Desmond wasn't entirely sure what to make of them. He assumed some of what they said had to be little more than hallucinations, odd sparks in the brain during the ordeal. Each described a scenario from their pasts, played out with minor changes.

Gil described them as locks, puzzles to solve so they could access the

inner workings of the Orbs. Once they solved them, the three were able to ask questions of the devices, gathering information that was directly downloaded into their brains. When they woke, they could input their newfound knowledge into computers.

Desmond thought the whole experiment sounded risky. He doubted it would work when they took the devices aboard but when it did, he worried about the safety of his crew members. The three of them were put into a coma during the event and the medics had no idea what to do.

Once they regained consciousness, each of them appeared totally normal, as if the situation hadn't done more than drained them a little. After a meal and a bit of sleep, the doctors felt they'd be one hundred percent again. Some of them theorized they may not even have to go through the unlocking process should they try to access the Orbs.

After going in the first time, they seemed to have saved their password as it were. Desmond wondered if that meant they were forever marked by the devices, if they'd collected some extra baggage with it. No one could tell and even advanced Pahxin medical science could find no evidence of altered brain waves.

They didn't become psychic, but they sure as hell went through something crazy. Desmond looked forward to hearing the debates between the scientists about the situation. It was the sort of thing they lived for. After years of studying the Orbs, they finally unlocked something brand new.

Those who lived with the Orbs would certainly agree that what the three individuals went through was worth the risk. Desmond wasn't sure Cassie or Heathrow agreed, especially the marine. He complained about it the most of the three. Mostly because he wasn't even part of the experiment. He'd been in the security control room when they initiated it.

Commander Vincent Bowman and Cassie had become quite close. Desmond assumed she'd spoken to him if to anyone about what happened. He stood from his chair and joined her, noting how quiet she was as she stared at her screen. The terminal was running a scan

of the Earth, but he couldn't figure out why.
"Welcome back to the bridge," Desmond said. "How're you feeling?"
"I'm fine, sir," Cassie replied, without looking up.
"No strange side effects or bad dreams?"
"None. It was …" Cassie shrugged. "Like nothing even happened I guess."
"Crazy." Desmond caught the vibe that she didn't want to talk about it. He motioned to her screen. "What're you doing here?"
"I'm checking to see if there was any sort of impact by removing the Orbs from Earth," Cassie said. "When I woke up, I had an epiphany. Our planet may have come to rely on having the energy present. If so, there may be some kind of anomaly to look at, a shift in temperature … anything at all."
"You're thinking the Earth might be dependent on the Orb?" Desmond asked. "Salina, what's your thought on that?"
Lieutenant Salina Gold acted as their science officer. She turned from her station, shrugging her shoulders. "It makes perfect sense to me. The thing's been there for generations … We don't even necessarily know for how long. Our weather patterns could be impacted among a dozen other things. I wish I would've thought of it."
"Can you help?" Cassie asked. "I don't have a baseline to compare to."
"I've got data from the last six months," Salina said. "We can correlate it against that and see what's changed if that will work."
"Perfect."
The two of them began to collaborate and Desmond returned to his seat. He felt better seeing Cassie interact with Salina, getting to work on something that kept her animated. The two of them dove into the technical details of their work so he turned his attention to Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan, the pilot.
"Good job with that course," Desmond said. "We got pretty close … just as close as the Pahxin."
"I've learned a lot from them," Zach said, "but thank you. I was pretty proud of it."
"You should've been." Desmond smirked. "When are you going to let Deacon get us home?"

“When I’m in the brig or sick bay,” Zach joked. “In all seriousness, he’s been working on navs with me. He’s just as good at it as I am at this point. I’m impressed with his numbers. I’d say with a little more flight time, I’d advocate for his promotion.”
Desmond nodded. “High praise. When we leave next, we’ll make sure he’s on duty for the trip out. I think we’re going to have a couple days when we get home. Will you finally take some time off? Leave the ship maybe? I heard you haven’t gone to the surface the last four times we’ve been here.”
“Maybe.” Zach shrugged. “I’m just as good sticking around up here.”
“Fair enough.” Desmond checked his reports and saw a message coming in from Admiral Reach. Impatiently waiting to hear if we were successful. The request came through with just one word.
‘Well?’
Nailed it. Desmond stood. “Zach, you’ve got the con. I’ll be in my office. Let me know if anything pressing comes up.” He turned and paused as his eyes fell on Cassie and Salina. They continued to work through their project, fully engaged. He left, feeling like things were well on their way back to normal.

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Admiral Reach picked up the line the moment Desmond made contact. The older man’s face appeared, brow furrowed in a deep scowl. A sigil appeared at the bottom right of the screen, indicating they had a secure connection and could speak freely. Desmond wondered who they were worried about intercepting the message.
The force that attacked Gamma Alpha? Or someone else entirely?
“Hello,” Desmond said. “First off, I can tell you the mission was a success. We have the intelligence we needed and have learned the process to interface with the Orbs directly without going into hyperspace.”
Reach let out a sigh of relief. “That’s great news. Were there any complications?”
“From the moment we decided to move the Orbs,” Desmond replied.

“The attack at Gamma Alpha was a ruse to get an agent aboard the ship. They managed to inform the Tol’An of our destination then caused some havoc while we were in transit.”
“How so?”
“They optimized our hyperspace component so the trip took far less time than anticipated. When we arrived, the Pahxin were engaged with the Tol’An. Luckily, our people gathered the information we needed quickly or we might’ve been in a lot of trouble.”
“I see.” Reach rubbed his temples before continuing. “So we know where the other Orbs are now?”
“Yes. Gil Vaedra and Cassandra Alexander will be offering full briefings when we get back in just under six hours now. We’ll need to act quickly though. One of the Orbs is about to be discovered by the Kalrawv Group.”
“Those bastard mercenaries.” Reach practically spit. “Okay, so you’re basically saying we’ve got our work cut out for us, right?”
“Don’t we always?” Desmond asked.
“The story of our lives since we got the hyperdrive to work.” Reach sighed. “Remember the good old days of ignorance and aspiring to the stars? Now … Now, we’re deep into intrigues and politics. The Pahxin are about to establish an embassy here and we’ve been invited to do the same.”
“That’s good news.” Desmond tilted his head. “What about the attackers of Gamma Alpha? Do we know who they were?”
“Mercenaries,” Reach replied. “We didn’t get any prisoners and they didn’t bring along any identifying marks but after studying the tactics, our people have determined they belong to a group that doesn’t really care who they hire out to. The Tol’An couldn’t have paid them so that means we have a human traitor.”
“I don’t know how that’s possible,” Desmond said. “How would they even know to work with the Tol’An? How would they have established contact?”
“There are a couple different theories. One, they might have decided to take it upon themselves to work for the terrorists in the hopes they might talk to them later and seek some sort of compensation for their

efforts." Reach shrugged. "I don't buy that one as much as thinking the agent got to someone and turned them quickly."
"It would've been really fast." Desmond frowned. "Maybe they threatened someone's family? I don't know. Who's looking into this?"
"I'm going to have Christina Dawson dive in when she returns to Earth. She's a good investigator and can probably turn something up quickly enough."
"Sounds good to me." Desmond considered the situation. If one of their own was causing trouble, then they would need to lock down their plans to gather the other Orbs. "We need to limit the number of people who will be involved in the next mission. Need to know only."
"I couldn't agree more." Reach nodded. "I'm going to keep it to you, me and Dulain."
Desmond fought an urge to groan. "Understood."
Reach chuckled. "You don't approve of him?"
"It's not that," Desmond said. "He's good at what he does and definitely enthusiastic. Honestly, without him we wouldn't have figured some things out up here. But he's definitely got an ego … and a lot of attitude. I'm not sure what to make of him but I do sort of see how he rose to prominence."
"Yes, he's a political animal and a doer. Dangerous combination if you ask me. And now he has more power than most politicians. If he wanted, he could start a war with just about anyone tomorrow. I'm glad he has enough sense to keep his ambitions in check and do the right thing."
"Do you think he's going to have something to contribute to the planning though?" Desmond asked. "I'd rather have Vincent involved if I'm to be honest. He has a tactical mind whereas Dulain … I don't have any clue where his head is."
"His primary concerns involve the dangers to Earth," Reach replied. "And he did graduate from a military school. I think you'll find he has solid insights." He chuckled. "Besides, if we tried to keep him out, he'd just find a way to sneak his way in. Believe me, inviting him keeps the AIA on our side and means they don't have to bug our rooms."

“Fair enough.” Desmond frowned. “Do you think we should have the Pahxin captain involved? Ulian is a solid commander and if anyone could help us out, it would be him. I know he’s faced the Kalrawv Group before. He might even know about the place we’re going. I’d recommend him.”
“Okay, I’ll consider it.” Reach’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t think he might be compromised?”
“Not a chance. If he were, he was in the perfect position to destroy the Gnosis and take the Orbs. He defended us with his own people. I would stake my life on his integrity.”
“That’s high praise.” Reach nodded. “Okay, I’ll let you know when you get here. Thanks for the recommendation. We’ll talk again soon. Reach out.”
Desmond leaned back, turning to peer out the porthole. He didn’t have visibility to anything of interest on that side of the ship, just open space. The silence felt nice, the sense of being alone with nothing pressing for the next several minutes actually gave him the opportunity to relax.
His calendar would start filling up quickly. Engineering already put in a request to talk about some improvements. The damage done during the fight needed to be looked at. Security concerns had to be addressed. Someone from the Gnosis would need to be a liaison during the investigation into the person who worked for the Tol’An. Desmond’s world was about to be thrown into fast forward and he braced himself for it. That brief moment of silence was likely the last for quite a while.

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They reached Earth’s orbit and Vincent rushed through the hall, heading for the hangar. Cassie was already on route with Gil and Heat. All three of them were about to be inundated with questions from various people from scientists to intelligence agents. Their experiences interacting with the Orbs broke new ground and everyone needed to know about it.

Desmond allowed Vincent to join them, heading down to see if he might be capable of advocating for his people. He knew how doctors could be. When they got their hands on a new project, they sometimes forgot that their subjects required breaks and time to relax. God knew how long they'd be subjected to it, but he intended to be there to shield them.

Arriving in the hangar, the others were about to board one of the ships. Vincent dashed up the ramp, trying to catch his breath.

"Excuse me, Commander." Beaumont Dulain's voice made him straight up and he turned to look at the man. The intelligence director grinned at him as he stepped past before taking his seat. "I guess we're going to have a full load here. Christina and I decided to hitch a ride on the way. I hope no one minds."

Heat grunted from his seat near the front. "It'll be just as uncomfortable with or without you. These things aren't exactly the luxury liners I'm sure you're used to, sir."

Dulain shrugged. "We'll have to rough it."

"We'll see," Christina muttered. "If you're still good with that when we're half way down."

"At least we'll only have half way to go." Dulain shrugged before pulling out his tablet and staring at the screen.

Vincent nodded to Heat before sitting beside Cassie. She didn't immediately respond but stared into space until he leaned close.

"Hey," he whispered. "You here?"

Cassie blinked several times, turning to look at him. She smiled. "Yeah, I'm good."

"You seemed a little out of it."

"Just not looking forward to what happens next." Cassie drew a deep breath. "Doctor Harper already left along with the others. They're getting the labs ready to start fabricating what Gil talked about. The Orbs will follow, and we'll get started later tonight. It's all very exciting … for someone, I'm sure."

"I'm coming with you," Vincent replied. "Hopefully, I can help you guys. I intend to stick around until they're done."

"Thanks." Cassie gripped his hand tightly for a moment before letting

go. “I appreciate it more than you know.”
“I understand they’re going to be doing some serious inquiries.” Vincent nodded in Dulain’s direction. “That they’re trying to pin down the guys who got that agent aboard and hired the mercenaries. You hear anything?”
Cassie shook her head. “I’m afraid not. I’m being treated as if I’m a little delicate right now. I’m surprised I was allowed to go to the bridge and work with Salina if I’m to be honest.”
“Did you guys find anything?”
“Nah. It appears the Earth is not dependent on the Orbs after all. Scary theory.” Cassie shrugged. “But it turned out to just be something to pass the time with. I’m grateful that Salina was kind enough to indulge me.”
“Attention,” the pilot’s voice came over the speakers. “We are departing in ten seconds. Please be sure that you are strapped in. Thank you.”
Vincent secured his safety harness and leaned back. Visiting home seemed nice but he knew they’d be too busy to enjoy it. He watched out the window behind Heat as the ship left the hangar end plunged toward Earth’s orbit. For a brief moment, there was no sound … Then they hit their entry window and the turbulence began.
Heat looked like he might fall asleep but no one else on the shuttle remained as calm. Beaumont stopped looking at his screen, gripping his seat with white knuckles. Much as the man liked to act tough and put on a show, he wasn’t suited for field work, not anymore at least. His counterpart was another story.
Christina also looked cool as ice. She didn’t even look up from her device as the ship started really bouncing, her face as placid as Heat’s. The two of them were real soldiers, the kind who hit the ground and did dirty work on orders. Vincent had to admit he was more like Beaumont than they were.
When they were stranded, Vincent made his first real foray off the ship during an away mission. It was far more trying than he’d anticipated. He still privately struggled with losing Lawrence Gorman. The man sacrificed himself for the team, but it didn’t make the

situation any easier to stomach.
Vincent had led men into battle before but not since joining the Gnosis. Somehow, it was different when it happened on another planet. He couldn't explain why, he didn't specifically understand it, but having someone die away from Earth felt worse than losing those he'd lost in other fights. Perhaps it was the fact they couldn't recover his body.
A superstitious side of him stated it was horrible that Gorman had been lost on a foreign planet far from his roots. It was as if his spirit might never find peace being out there. Vincent kept the feeling to himself. Few people would understand. Perhaps not even the captain. As humanity pressed further into the stars, it would happen more and more.
And not necessarily through violence. Natural causes would eventually claim a life away from Earth. Perhaps part of the problem was the fact that the building acted as a temple to the strange inhabitants. They worshipped there and now Gorman was part of their dead race … at least in body.
"You okay?" Cassie nudged him with her elbow and he smiled at her. "Sorry, was I staring into space?"
Cassie nodded. "Yeah, you missed the whole trip almost." She gestured with her head toward Dulain. "He closed his eyes a couple of times."
"I'm sorry I missed it."
"You didn't miss shit," Heat said. "Er … sir."
"Surly as ever, Heat," Vincent said. "How're you feeling after your ordeal?"
"Fantastic, sir. I've never been better." Heat frowned. "However, if I'm to be honest, I would rather charge a machine-gun nest than go down there. If you understand my meaning, sir."
"I sadly do." Vincent sighed. "But it probably won't be as bad as you think."
"They're going to be thorough," Dulain said. "I would anticipate quite a few hours in the medical wing. And then there's the …"
Christina tapped his leg with the backs of her fingers.

“Oh … they’re …”
Christina nodded. “Yep. They sure were.”
“I see.” Dulain cleared his throat. “My apologies. Carry on.”
Heat shook his head. “Keeps getting better and better.”
Vincent offered Cassie an encouraging grin, but he couldn’t quite put any conviction behind it. Dulain made it clear what they had to look forward to and Vincent realized he’d made the right call tagging along.
Gil, Cassie and Heat represented three of the best crew members on board the Gnosis. They had survived the trip to the temple, saved several lives and continued to beat the odds on behalf of the Earth. Hopefully, their stint as lab rats wouldn’t last more than a day or two but even if it did, at least two of them would be saved when the Gnosis had to leave again.
Never thought I’d be hoping for a combat mission so much, Vincent thought. It might be the only thing that gets Heat and Cassie out of this situation in a timely fashion.

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Dulain stepped off the shuttle, taking a moment to thank God he made it without throwing up. He exercised every ounce of willpower to walk steadily, to avoid stumbling, much as he wanted to, and made it to the operations building of Gamma Alpha where he leaned against the wall.
Christina walked with him, barely containing a grin. He knew she recognized his discomfort, but she at least had the kindness to keep a jibe to herself. Did the others catch on or did she simply know him well enough to see the signs? Whatever the case, if anyone else saw his weakness, they didn’t let on.
Nurses came out to escort Cassandra, Heathrow and Gil into the facility. That would be the last time Dulain saw them for a while. He needed to make sure they didn’t give Cassie too hard of a time. He needed her back on the Gnosis for the next leg of their trip and didn’t want her exhausted or out of commission.

“Christina,” Dulain spoke quietly and she had to lean close to hear, “make sure they know to go easy on Cassandra. I don’t care about the Pahxin or the marine, but our agent has to be ready to get back on that starship ASAP. Got it?”
“Yes, you’re a humanitarian and you want me to make it clear,” Christina replied. “I’ve got it.”
“You know what I mean!” Dulain scowled at her. “It’s not that I don’t care about those people, but they’re not directly involved in our actions with the Gnosis. Cassie has ingratiated herself with the staff up there perfectly. They’ve come to rely on her and if we need her to take control, she’s in position to do so.
“I don’t want to have to develop a brand-new asset.”
“Understood.” Christina looked away, clearly disapproving.
“Naturally, I don’t want them to harm the marine or the Pahxin.”
“Naturally?” Christina shrugged. “I was thinking you didn’t much care either way.’
“That’s not correct. I’m not a monster.”
“You just become so focused that you sound like one sometimes.” Christina stepped away. “Admiral Reach wants me for a briefing about an investigation into who betrayed us to the Tol’An. I’ll talk to you later.”
Dulain caught her arm before she could leave. “Look, I don’t often say this … I don’t mean to be harsh. It’s just that we’re in a serious situation and it doesn’t really cater to being gentle.”
“I get it.” Christina patted his hand. “Maybe I’m just tired of how we’re direct behind closed doors or alone then dance around the truth with others like we’re afraid something genuine might come out. You know I get it though. Just once, I kinda didn’t want to go down a path where someone was practically expendable. Even if it’s true.”
“I can find another agent to do Reach’s investigation,” Dulain said. “You can take some time off.”
“I’m insulted.” Christina grinned. “Don’t take my complaining as weakness or a plea for a break. Go do something shady, Beaumont. I’ll be placating the good Admiral for a while and will catch up with you tonight for a briefing. Maybe we can find the asshole who sent that

army here to mess with the Orbs."
"Good luck." Dulain watched her leave and considered his next move. He had a lot of people to talk to and little time to do it before the Gnosis left again. Reach invited him to plan their attack on the Kalrawv Group base, or at least how they were going to get the Orb back. He looked forward to contributing.

***

Cassie was surprised that the medical check-ups didn't last that long. The doctors had them run on a treadmill, drew some blood and ran some tests but after an hour and a half, they were sent to a briefing room to discuss what they saw again. Each of them recounted their experiences before Gil went about drawing up the schematics for the interface device.
After another two hours of conversation, they were given dinner and released just after eight o'clock at night. Cassie stepped out into the hall, nearly bumping into Vincent. He took her arm as she came out and she looked up at him, feeling dazed. The event had still been grueling, but her mind reeled at how suddenly it ended.
"You okay?" Vincent asked.
"Yeah," Cassie replied. "It's over. They checked us out … got our briefings … They already knew the star system … so I guess we're good. Gil's staying behind to work on the interface device with Harper, so we'll lose his company this round."
"Can we do that?" Vincent asked.
Cassie shrugged. "Thayne was there. He made the call. Once we have that device we'll have a huge advantage over the Tol'An. At least that's what they're all saying."
"You're not so sure?"
"No, but it's mostly just a bad feeling. Not based on anything real." Cassie smiled at him. "I'd love to get some downtime." She hesitated. "You … want to come with me? I'm sure they don't need anything else from us until tomorrow morning. Even Dulain has enough compassion to leave me alone for the rest of the night."

Vincent was about to answer when his com went off. He held up a finger and stepped away. Cassie took the moment to lean against the wall, staring down the hall. Heat stepped out beside her, nudging her as he walked by. It drew her attention and she tilted her head, confused by the contact.

"We survived," Heat said. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I've been through worse. You know what they say. Dread of the thing and all that." Heat chuckled. "I expected them to radiate us or put us through a freezer or something. This was a picnic by comparison. What're you two going to do now? I'm thinking of hopping down to the barracks and getting a drink … or ten."

"I'm going to bed," Cassie replied. "I have no idea what Vincent's going to do."

Heat quirked a brow. "Maybe you both will?"

She scowled. "None of your business."

"Uh huh." Heat stepped away. "Have a good one, Cassie. If I had to spend a shitty day with someone, I'm glad it was you."

"Bye …" Cassie watched him go, wondering how he was truly doing. Gorman had been his best friend. Losing him clearly bothered the marine, especially when he talked about his experience with the Orb. She never thought she'd see the tough man emotional, but he very nearly broke down describing the event.

When it came her turn to talk about the training exercise, she held back. They pressed but she couldn't talk about it, not with any real detail. She had to dance around the truth to avoid revealing AIA secrets. The doctors weren't happy, but they had to accept it. Heat even backed her up at one point, reminding them of the term top secret.

Gil's description was far less personal than theirs, or at least the way he told the story it certainly was. He went through it without any passion, keeping his sentences concise and to the point. When he finished, he took a sip of water and made some notes before continuing on to what happened when they contacted the Orb.

I need to talk to Christina about what happened to me, Cassie thought.

She'll understand and more importantly, I can tell her everything. She went through it too.
"Hey," Vincent broke through her thoughts, "I've got bad news. That was Captain Bradford. We're doing a briefing now that all the information's been posted. Admiral Reach, Dulain, the Pahxin Captain … It's a big deal. I … Looks like it's just us. Probably to talk about getting the next Orb."
"Undoubtedly." Cassie smiled, putting her hand on his cheek. "I guess I'll see you later then, huh?"
"I can come when it's over," Vincent offered. "If you don't mind."
"Ping me. If I'm awake, I'll definitely invite you." Cassie noted the disappointment in his expression. "Just swing by and knock. How long could they possibly go on at this hour, right?"
"Exactly." Vincent pulled her into a quick hug. "I'll see you as soon as I possibly can. Get some water or something. God knows what they did to you probably dehydrated the hell out of you."
"I will." Cassie waved at him and turned away, heading for her quarters. Exhaustion crept in on her. She hoped she'd recover enough to be ready for the next mission. Bouncing back hadn't been a problem thus far but after mentally touching the Orb and enduring a day long interrogation, she wasn't so sure it would be easy again.

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Chapter 2

Gizan knew what would happen if he failed again. There would be no imprisonment, no admonishment. He would be publicly tortured to death to show the others what happened when one fell from grace. Despite years of service, even prior to the official beginning of the Tol'An, he too was considered expendable.

And that didn't set well with him. Yes, he understood the need to push for success, to ensure the Tol'An succeeded but operations involved fluid events. None of them could be predicted and therefore, failure was always a possibility. Killing good men because they did not always succeed made no sense.

How were they to learn from mistakes and improve?

Sitting in the prison cell gave him thoughts that he hadn't considered since long before he started working for the cause. He began to question the views of the Tol'An, and especially Ezria. Perhaps the man was not as wise as he had always believed. His arrogance began to encroach upon his sense.

Perhaps I am working for the wrong leader. Gizan didn't even feel treasonous considering such a thing. He wondered why it took him so long. He would do this job and return himself to the good graces of the Tol'An but he did not feel the same zeal he had before. Being cast aside so easily irritated him.

Gizan caught a transport vessel from a nearby Kalrawv Group base. They were sending in new workers to help with the mining operations and it was easy enough to sign up for the work. Only the desperate accepted such jobs because the conditions were terrible. He didn't care. He only needed access to the planet and everything else would be simple after that.

The Kalrawv Group had decent enough scanning equipment and he knew precisely how to calibrate it to find Trindisha technology. Once he gained entry into their control room, he'd locate it and call in his own soldiers to get it out of there. He figured there'd be a battle but despite having decent weapons, the Kalrawv Group soldiers rarely put

up a real fight.
Gizan had killed countless of their supposed fighters throughout his career and he only encountered two that resisted with any real heart. Even they died quickly but he considered their ends to be significant blows to the Kalrawv military forces. Those who fought solely for pay never put forth the effort necessary to win.
He counted on the trend continuing when he arrived on their world. Security already proved to be lax when he snuck a knife under their noses. Gizan wore a tattered brown coat, threadbare cargo pants and scuffed boots. He looked like any vagabond miner, always on the move for work.
And the ruse allowed him through the checkpoint with hardly a second glance.
Other facilities throughout the galaxy would've caught him with it. Especially closer to the Pahxin controlled worlds. Out in the frontiers, the fringes of known space, rules, and those who enforced them, became lax. Gizan wondered if the Tol'An would fix that or if they would become just another centralized power, doing as they pleased while lining their pockets.
Cynicism challenged his sense of loyalty. As the shuttle put down on the platform, he began to wonder if he would ever trust Ezria again. If Gizan failed, it wouldn't matter how he felt. His leader would have him killed. But even if he succeeded, he didn't know how much longer he could remain in the Tol'An service.
What would I do with myself? Gizan dedicated his entire existence to working for the Tol'An. His zeal was never matched. Had he wanted it, he likely would've taken the supreme leader role but he chose to remain the blade in the night, the enforcer. His thoughts alone betrayed his station.
If Ezria knew Gizan was thinking such things, it would be grounds for execution. So many things led to death within the Tol'An. How did so many people sign up for the cause? Gizan couldn't fathom it but there he was, bound to them. Even if he left, how long would it be before some attack force attempted to catch up to him?
He knew the men Ezria would send. None of them could stand up to

him but they would try. More lives thrown away, more men cast off for the vanity of a single individual. The Tol'An leader represented the real problem with the organization. They stood for something pure, but he took them down a dark path.

The doors opened and the foreman shouted at them to disembark. Gizan cast aside his doubts and concerns. He had a job to do and regardless of how he felt for the leader, he committed to getting it done. He stepped through the doors and followed the precession toward the admittance officer.

Soon, he'd have access to the communal quarters and then, be allowed to move about the station. The foreman likely already had a schedule in place for the new miners so Gizan needed to act quickly before they sent him deep under the planet's surface. It wouldn't matter too much. He was in and the Kalrawv Group would certainly lament their lack of security by the time he was done.

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Vincent entered the briefing room to find he was the last to arrive. Taking a seat near the door, he noted Ulian Hataran from the Pahxin ship Stalwart sat near the head of the table with Desmond to his right. Dulain was also there with Admiral Reach leading the meeting. He wondered why they kept the audience so small.

Must be more secret than normal.

Admiral Reach dove in. "I've sent each of you the intelligence we gathered on the planet you'll be visiting. The Kalrawv Group has set up an operation there to mine for resources. Note that they do not have a legal right to this location but it's far enough out of the way that no one would have stumbled upon them."

Vincent lifted his hand. "So we are not going to be opening some kind of legal dispute if we go in there and attack them? Just how shady is this organization? Thayne told me that they're basically a corporation and have been doing business for decades. How is that possible if they're always running around breaking the law?"

Ulian said, “The Kalrawv Group is a multilayered organization. Those at the front have offices on our home planet and do good business. They’ve sold starships, surveying equipment and countless other goods to just about every other organization in our alliance. However, it is also known that they have an underside.”
“That commits crime,” Vincent replied. “Correct?”
“Sort of,” Ulian said. “The further out they get, the fewer laws apply. They bend what laws are in place just to the point of breaking. Employment records show they pull from outlaws, mercenaries and adventurers from around the galaxy. There’s no shortage of people willing to do whatever it takes to make extra money.”
Vincent shook his head but didn’t say anything else.
“Anyway,” Reach continued, “the planet is volatile. We’ll be sending marines down to collect the Orb but know that on the surface, the weather is insane. Hurricanes, tornadoes … you name it, they’ve endured it. This should tell you how much the Kalrawv Group wants whatever they’re mining down there. It’s serious business.”
“Must make them a fortune,” Desmond replied. “So we’re going to hop in, fend off their orbiting ships while our marines hit the surface, secure the package and get back to the ship. Seems direct enough. How much opposition are we expecting?”
“Severe,” Ulian said. “They have committed a fairly large force to the area. This concerns me for multiple reasons. The first of which is they are out in the middle of nowhere so who are they expecting to show up and cause them trouble? Second, do they know there’s an Orb there and are looking for it?”
“Do you think they want one?” Dulain asked. “I mean, governments start looking at these things with a greedy eye. Unless they kept it secret …” He paused. “I see. They find this one on the edge of space, bring it home and no one’s the wiser. They have the opportunity to explore the benefits of one of these things.”
“Exactly,” Reach said. “But we still don’t know if that’s why they are there. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. We’re taking it and they’re going to let us. Ulian and the Stalwart will back up the Gnosis. The Gnosis will send down marines in power armor, which will protect them from

the atmospheric problems."
"Did people once live on this world?" Desmond asked.
"Yes," Ulian replied. "Looking at the intelligence, my science officer states there was an indigenous people, but they died out. Possibly due to technology gone wild but she can't be sure without getting down there and performing several scans. I doubt we will have the opportunity. It seems we'll be in a bit of a hurry."
"Do the Tol'An know about this?" Vincent asked.
"We don't know," Dulain said. "There's no reason they should. Only a few people know about this planet and I've vetted them on our side … The Pahxin vouched for theirs. I think we're good. No leaks got out this time. Providing the mission launches soon, you shouldn't have any additional problems to contend with."
Vincent frowned. "But they have their own Orbs …"
"In which case," Ulian said, "we do not know if they can interface them properly. The Kalrawv Group may already be engaged with Tol'An combatants. But at least we know it was still there as of yesterday. Now, it's time to get out there." He stood. "I'll prep my vessel for launch and let you know when we can jump to hyperspace."
Desmond stood as well. "They finished going over the hyperspace protocols. The saboteur actually did upgrade the system. It's all above board and works fine. I guess he thought we'd be destroyed so it wouldn't matter. This means we'll be able to get out there faster … possibly on par with the Stalwart."
"Excellent." Reach nodded. "If there's nothing else, these men of action seem ready to take some. Dulain?"
"I'm good. I've got plenty to take care of here back on Earth and I'll let you know what we find as soon as we do."
Reach turned to Vincent. "Are you good?"
"Yes, sir." Vincent stood.
"Then Godspeed, everyone. Get that Orb. Make sure those mercenaries do not lay their hands on that technology. We cannot afford a third power to contend with in the middle of this conflict. The Tol'An is enough of a problem to keep our hands full without adding a bunch of corporate lackeys to the mix. Especially after all the reports I've read

about them."
Vincent followed the others into the hall and stopped Desmond. "Why did we have such a small audience in there?"
"People are worried about a leak." Desmond clapped his shoulder. "Get some rest. We leave for the Gnosis tomorrow at eleven-hundred hours."
"Yes, sir." Vincent watched the man go and headed off to Cassie's quarters. He hoped she wasn't asleep yet but even if she was, the opportunity to put his head down for a few hours appealed to him too. The briefing had been short but what they discussed wore on his mind. It made him consider the dangers they'd be facing.
Some of their missions at least started out peaceful. This escalated before they even left. At least we'll have some back up right off the bat. He knocked on her door and smiled at the sound of footsteps approaching. Shoving aside all his concerns and worries, he let himself live in the moment.

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Lieutenant Brent Fielding hated downtime, especially when it meant sitting around in a hospital. After defending the Gnosis, he received what could've been a career ending injury. If not for advanced medicine and some information from the Orb, he would've either lost the arm or never had full range of motion again.
The doctors were able to preserve his limb and he was already well on his way to mending completely. He'd even heard rumors that he'd be allowed to return to light duty soon. He pushed for it in a major way. Desk work beat lying around with nothing to do any day and he'd happily perform whatever task they came up with.
When Captain Darren Gabriel showed up to visit him, he had to fight back a surge of hope. The man gripped his hand in greeting. "How're you doing, son? You look a lot better than the last time I saw you."
"I'm feeling much better, sir," Fielding replied. "I'm off the pain meds now. I wish they would've had this tech the last time I got hurt. It's incredible."

“I hear you.” Gabriel took a seat. “I’m here to ask you a question and I want an honest, no bullshit response, do you understand?”
“Of course, sir.”
“Are you up for coming back to the Gnosis with me on light duty?”
Gabriel held up his hand to stave off an immediate answer. “I could use you for the tactical operations onboard while the marines hit the surface. You’d be on coms, giving instructions and backup. You’d also be a liaison with the pilots who will provide some air support.”
Fielding wanted to blurt out his answer but if he didn’t show some signs of considering it, the captain would likely dismiss his enthusiasm. He drew a deep breath before replying. “Sir, they’ve talked about putting me on light duty. What you’re suggesting is basically a desk job. I know for a fact I’m prepared to do that kind of work.”
“I read that on your chart,” Gabriel said. “And I’m happy to hear it.” He stood. “The nurses are going to check you out in the next hour. I’ll be back and we’ll both return to the ship together. Welcome back to the team, son. I’m glad to have you.”
“I’m glad to be back.” Fielding resisted the urge to cheer. “Thank you again!”
“You’re welcome. I’ll brief you on the mission when we’re back aboard the ship and you’re settled in. We’re leaving soon though so don’t dally. This is a time sensitive situation and we’re up against the clock.”
“Is there any other way with us?” Fielding grinned.
Gabriel shook his head. “No, probably not. See you soon.”
Fielding relaxed into the bed and stared at the ceiling. Relief made him smile despite himself. The nurses came to assist him with the sign out process. They gave him his clothes and he dressed for departure. Peering into the bathroom mirror, he frowned at the dark circles under his eyes.
I’ve had too much rest, Fielding thought. I haven’t slept or lounged around for so long in years. It was far past time I get back to work. He couldn’t wait to see the men and talk to them about their recent operations. He looked forward to the time he could lead them in battle

again, get out in the dirt with them.
One step at a time. Fielding left the hospital to meet with Gabriel. He had a briefing to attend.

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden fidgeted in the hangar of Gamma Alpha, checking his watch every twenty seconds. He craned his neck, looking in all directions for the Pahxin pilot Dala Ahnshyr. They'd flown several missions together and intended to meet up before heading out on their next operation.
She seemed to be running nearly ten minutes late.
We're all busy, Dennis reminded himself. She's not ditching me. She probably just got caught up with something.
Pahxin representatives became more common within Gamma Alpha after the ambassadorial mission. The cooperation was fantastic, especially considering the Earth held two of the Orbs. The planet proved far more important and so it garnered better protection for the solar system.
Military personnel believed the Tol'An would launch another attack in the near future. It made sense. If they wanted to finish their goals, they needed to claim the Orbs and after failing to grab them in the last mission, the only chance would be to assault the Earth directly. Fortunately, they would have some serious opposition if they tried again.
"Good day." Dennis jumped when Dala spoke behind him. He turned, smiling at the blonde woman who looked incredibly severe in her black uniform. "I do hope you did not wait too long for me. They are locking down the entire base to transport the Orbs back to their cradles."
"No, it's fine." Dennis motioned with his head. "Come on, let's at least move to the side. The hangar can get a bit crazy sometimes. If we're near the wall, we won't be yelled at to get out of the way." He escorted her away. "How've you been? I'd hoped to talk more on the way home but it was so fast …"

“We are very busy. Planning this mission against the Kalrawv Group requires special care.”
“Why’s that?”
“Because they have excellent technology,” Dala said, “but poor soldiers. They will be a challenge in the same way a child with a firearm is. They can still injure but they are not well trained. Of course, we might be surprised. If the location is as important to them as it sounds like, then they might have put their best me on the job.”
“What’re you recommending?”
“Our best,” Dala said. “Get them out there immediately and have them hit the opponents hard and fast. Destroy their ships before they can launch fighters. Bomb the mining facility to eliminate soldiers. Then sweep the area with fighters until your soldiers are in place to claim the device.”
“That … seems a little harsh. What about civilians?”
“They are Kalrawv Group.” Dala shrugged. “That means there are no civilians, only targets.”
“Surely, they have normal people working for them.”
Dala frowned. “Those who sign up for their service may not necessarily be the same type of criminal, but they know what they’re getting into. They are outside the law. Much like the Tol’An. Do you have any idea how they have impacted our people? Made the civilian population paranoid for their lives no matter where they go?”
“These criminal organizations deserve what they get. If it were up to me, we would’ve disbanded Kalrawv some time ago and redistributed their wealth to the various individuals and families that were impacted by their greed.”
They arrived at the edge of the hangar and Dennis leaned against the wall. “I didn’t know you guys were so … intense. Did you lose many people in the last operation?”
“Some.” Dala directed her attention to one of the ships nearby. “Perhaps ten in total. They were honorable soldiers.”
“I’ve seen how some of you fly. You don’t use the most cautious of tactics.”
Dala shook her head. “War is about winning. We lose soldiers in war

but there are enough to ensure we achieve victory."
"Are you … I don't know … sad about it?"
"There is remorse, yes." Dala nodded. "We mourn those who pass. Do you not?"
"Oh, yeah, of course. I just … I didn't know based on your response … you know … how you guys felt about such things."
"It's a matter of circumstance. We recognize the danger … understand it … but emotions are there, I assure you." Dala smiled at him. It made him feel better about the conversation. "War would be very difficult if we didn't have a pragmatic view of death. Those of us who serve, we choose to do so. This is not pressed upon us like the Tol'An."
"I get it." Dennis checked his watch. "Say … we've got like … two hours before we have to get back to our respective ships. Do you want to … get something to eat together? The cafeteria isn't incredible but it beats a vending machine. And we can … I dunno … talk about something besides war and the mission?"
"I would like that very much." Dala gestured. "Please lead the way. I'm excited to hear more about your family and how you celebrate them on Earth. There are so many things I'm curious about. I hope you don't mind."
"Not in the least," Dennis replied, leading her out. The Pahxin may have been dramatically different when it came to their views on conflict and battle, but other parts of their lives seemed quite similar to the human way of life. The Kalrawv Group was a perfect example. Greed existed in every culture.
But that wasn't what Dennis planned to focus on that afternoon. If he only had two hours to spend with someone before they had to get back into the fray, he wanted it to be special. Or at least interesting. He wasn't entirely sure where he wanted to go with Dala or how far they even could, considering their culture differences … and living light years apart.
That didn't stop him from exploring possibilities, however remote they might be.

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Chapter 3

Gizan received orders to report to one of the mine shafts north of the facility. According to the records he received, it would require an hour via surface railway and he'd be expected to put in a seven-hour shift. According to the foreman, he couldn't guarantee that's where he'd be the next day either.

They changed their roster nightly.

Inefficient. Gizan never thought of the Kalrawv Group as particularly thoughtful but as a money-grubbing organization, they should have at least kept a tight operation. To prove how useless they were, he departed the barracks two hours after lights out and wandered freely about the base, without hardly having to hide his presence as he moved about.

There were no guards and despite the fact they worked people around the clock, none of the services seemed to be open. The corridors around his particular crew were dead silent, making him wonder where they all were. Leaving the basic living area brought him into a more lively area where off duty workers gathered.

Men passed around drinks and shouted at each other, horror stories of their times in the mine. Most of them were likely exaggerating to impress the others. Their jobs were not glamorous and most of the time, they merely drilled the walls until they were relieved. No real effort was required by these people, not thought.

Anyone with hands could do the work.

He slipped through the crowd to the next corridor, this one leading to the living area of the actual Kalrawv representatives. Two guards stood at the passage way, barring his path. He sized them up, noted how bored they looked and decided on a crude but typically effective manner of getting them to move.

Gizan returned to the crowd and spoke to the bartender, letting him know he'd pay for everyone to have a round. Once that was announced, the people standing around became animated, shouting their appreciation. They surged forward to collect their free beverage

and that's when Gizan shoved one miner into another.
The men connected and turned on one another, each under the influence of too much drink.
"Why'd you shove me?"
"I didn't. Someone shoved me."
"My arse. You shoved me!"
"I saw him," Gizan said, gesturing to the accused. "This guy definitely shoved you."
"Bastard!" A punch was thrown. The others turned to see what was happening. The fight grew more heated as the two wrestled each other to the ground. Shouts from the crowd encouraged them, egging them on to greater violence. Gizan inched his way back out to the edge, watching as the two guards left their post to break it up.
By the time they arrived, others had joined the fray. Gizan slipped into the corridor, leaving the conflict behind. He needed a security card, one that would give him access to other parts of the base. He knew someone would oblige and it was late enough that most of the most important individuals would be asleep.
If they bothered with cameras, they were well hidden. He didn't see any of the telltale signs of them, no bumps or holes in the metal. Perhaps there was no reason to be concerned about intruders. He found that doubtful considering the pay he'd been promised to fly out there but if they only relied on guards for security, it made his job all the more easier.
Gizan found a terminal at the end of the hall. He tapped the screen, bringing up a directory. It gave the room number of each of the people living there. Their titles weren't listed so it didn't prove to be of much use. He approached the first room and knocked on the door, scanning the hallway to ensure he was not seen.
The door slid open and a sleepy looking man peered out. He wore a pair of black pants and nothing else, his dark hair sticking up in odd directions. Squinting at Gizan, he cleared his throat. "Can I help you with something? Who are you? How'd you get in here?" He opened his mouth for another question but Gizan grabbed him by the throat, pushing him into the room.

The door slid shut. Gizan drew his knife and pressed it against the side of the man's neck. "I will kill you if you scream. Do you understand?"
The man nodded. "Good. I have questions you will answer. Let's start with a simple one. Where is the highest-ranking individual of this base? Where do they reside?"
"Down … down the hall …" the man gasped. "He's … in room … sixteen …"
"Thank you." Gizan sized him up. The man was roughly his size. "Where is the control room?"
"Why?"
Gizan tightened his grip and the man's eyes bulged.
"Okay! Okay! It's … up … the elevator … in the … north … northwest …"
"Very good. When is your next shift?"
"Five hours."
"Excellent." Gizan thrust the knife into the man's neck and brought him to the ground. He let go of his throat to cover his mouth, stifling his gurgling moans. After a couple of quick convulsions, the man went still, his eyes turning glassy. Gizan withdrew the knife and slid the man under his own bed then rifled through his clothes.
A proper uniform would get him far and after he visited the higher up, he'd have the key card he needed to access the facility infrastructure. Scanning for the Trindisha would be no problem and he'd have his people on the planet's surface in less than a few hours. He would restore his honor in the eyes of Ezria.
And then he could decide on his future with the Tol'An … if indeed he had one.

***

Desmond stepped onto the Gnosis bridge and prepared to give the order for departure. Vincent was already there, working closely with Salina and Zach near the helm. He took a seat and left them to their business, turning his attention to a bevy of messages that hit his account in the last five minutes.

Admiral Reach sent an urgent message stating the Gnosis had full clearance to depart with personnel in place. No changes were required and any demands to the contrary could be ignored. This stood for all military and non-military crew members who operated aboard the ship and had been for some time.

That's strange. Desmond looked down and noted a message from Dulain and Doctor Harper as well. He checked Dulain's first.

Captain, please note that you have my full confidence and I look forward to hearing the results of your mission. Senior Agent Alexander is at your disposal. She is not required for further testing nor any other activities within Gamma Alpha. We will continue to conduct the investigation on Earth into the human traitor without her participation. Thank you.

Desmond scowled at the screen, but he figured out what was going on. When he clicked Doctor Harper's message, it didn't surprise him in the least.

Captain, I must strongly protest the departure of Senior Agent Alexander. While many of our tests were accomplished during that one afternoon, we have many more to explore, not all of which have been devised. Cassandra has performed this procedure two times, that makes her unique to the other test subjects.

Please reconsider taking her on this next mission and leave her in the care of Gamma Alpha researchers. There's a great deal we can learn from her. I'm sure you understand and will make this adjustment immediately.

Desmond was surprised both Dulain and Reach supported Cassie going on the mission. Technically speaking, she probably wasn't entirely necessary. The mission primarily involved military action, all combat for the most part. She could help with scans, of course … locating the Orb potentially but so could Salina.

Yet her superior and Desmond's direct commander defied Harper. Reach and Dulain probably see they have plenty on their plate without messing with Cassie. I wish I could believe Dulain was being wholly altruistic toward his agent. I'm sure he's got an ulterior motive. Why would Reach care? Must've been some kind of argument between

him and Harper and he hates to lose.
Cassie entered the bridge and took her post. Desmond thought to mention some of what he'd just experienced to her, but Vincent interrupted. "Captain, we've coordinated with the Stalwart and our coordinates are laid in. We should arrive at roughly the same time as our allies and be combat ready in minutes."
"Excellent." Desmond turned. "Cassie, will you be able to locate the Orb when we arrive?"
"I'll work with the science officer on the Stalwart," Cassie said. "I'm assuming Salina will be too busy with the operation to do much in that regard?"
"I will," Salina replied. "But if you need help, I'm sure I'll be able to pull away at least for a minute."
"Sounds like we're all good." Desmond patted the arms of his chair. "I've received clearance from Admiral Reach himself. We can depart orbit and get this party started. Take us out, Zach, and remember, Deacon's bringing us home."
"I doubt I could ever forget it," Zach muttered but it was clear he was grinning. "Engaging thrusters. Breaking orbit. Estimated time to jump point, thirty minutes."
Time to grab a third Orb … and solidify the Kalrawv Group as a serious enemy. Desmond squinted at the screen. One threat at time. That's all we can worry about right now. Especially when one enemy merely wants to line their pockets while the other is intent on destroying civilization as we know it.

***

Ulian checked how long it would take to arrive at their destination before turning to his first officer, Morala Crelden. She was absorbed in a report, reading intently. They went through the intel on the attack together, collaborating on what they felt might be the greatest challenges when it came to the conflict.
The information they received from long range probes from their people suggested a decent sized force, both ships and personnel.

Several civilians were likely present, mostly prospectors and miners desperate for a big payout. The Kalrawv Group paid well but were generally known for poor working conditions.

Morala worked out the attack plan with a few modifications from Ulian. Her initial recommendation didn't take into consideration the civilians and called for bombarding the surface as soon as they arrived to make an easier approach for the ground forces. Her rationale came down to the importance of getting the Trindisha.

Ulian didn't accept they needed to do so at any cost. Instead of hitting the surface, he recommended they engage the fleet above the planet, attack the fighters and let the superior training of the human marines take care of the Kalrawv security forces. They would be no match for the power armor, making it easy to preserve innocent lives.

He'd watched Morala grow as an officer, witnessing her rapid rise through the ranks. She didn't have anything left to learn about tactics or operations. All her lessons revolved around morality and not being rash. She still preferred to plunge into battle, spearheading attacks that would be far more effective with some subtlety.

Years of working together showed she was coming around but her mentality of putting her head down and plowing into danger still plagued her time and again. She needed to quell it eventually, definitely before she took command herself. She continued to mature, honing herself into a solid strategist. It was just a matter of time. Ulian had no problem giving it to her. However, it became apparent during their tactics session that she was somewhat impatient. Morala stated in her last assessment that she was surprised she had not received an invitation to apply for her own ship. Ulian had the unenviable responsibility to let her know he hadn't recommended her yet.

He worried it might cause a schism between them but after a conversation, she claimed to understand. Their working relationship didn't seem to suffer. Ulian decided that the best way to help her would be to give her the opportunity to lead more missions, give her advice but ultimately allow her operational control.

As they headed toward the Kalrawv Group mining operation, he

would allow her to take on the action and only step in should his interference be required. He doubted it would be. Despite her impulsiveness, she was a quick-witted officer. The plan they agreed on held a high probability of success, especially with the Earth ship taking on the ground duties.

This left the Stalwart to worry about capital ships and fighters.

"Captain," Morala broke his thoughts, "we're approaching our destination. Emerging from hyperspace in less than five minutes."

"Thank you." Ulian turned to Erda Walar, their pilot. "Will we …" He paused and turned to Morala. "I believe this is your operation, Commander. Please. Do the honors."

"Thank you." Morala grinned but mastered herself quickly. "Erda, have you projected our exact entry point yet?"

"Yes, ma'am. We are right on target from departure. The Earth vessel should be in for the same. Intelligence suggests we will be less than ten-thousand kilometers from striking distance of the enemy. A quick thruster burst should put us in extreme range for targeting. I've taken the liberty of plotting that course and sent it to your console."

"I'll review it presently but plan on that action for now." Morala turned to her monitor and nodded a moment later. "This is a solid plan. Viran, I want a full sector scan the moment we emerge. Get me all data on any ships in the system, even those at the extreme edges. I want to know precisely what we're dealing with."

Viran Des worked as their technical officer and proved to be one of the finest Ulian ever worked with. She was a brilliant computer specialist and if she left the military, she'd have an incredible career in the private sector. As it was, the Stalwart got to enjoy her skills for a while longer and they were all the better for it.

"Kalrawv set up a jammer in the system," Viran said, "but I worked out how it works prior to our departure. I'll have the data, but it'll take a few moments longer than we're used to."

"Didn't you just say you understood their jamming technology?" Morala asked.

"Yes, but that only means it won't stop us from scanning. It will take a few moments to get through their security and get the data we

require."
"Understood." Morala frowned. "Do what you can and if you can hurry, do. I'm not sure that the human technology will be of much help in this regard so we can't necessarily rely on them."
Ulian leaned close to her, keeping his voice down. "Don't underestimate them … but more importantly, you can keep that second part of the thought process to yourself. Distrust the technology, absolutely, but the rest of the bridge doesn't need to know your thought process. They're believe you know what you're doing. Justifying actions can make them doubt."
"Thank you." Morala's cheeks colored. Ulian didn't mean to embarrass her but at least none of the others heard it. Furthermore, there was no other time that would've made her less unhappy with the remarks. Part of the learning process involved taking feedback whenever it was given. "We are emerging from hyperspace in less than thirty seconds. Erda?"
"Counting it down now, ma'am." Erda began to call out the numbers. Viran informed the ship of their imminent arrival. Ulian sat back to witness his officer's prowess and decide how ready she was for her own command.
There was a great deal at stake on that mission but he still intended to run it as routine. The worst thing he could do was make a big deal out of it, pushing his people to worry and cause themselves unnecessary stress. That was the road to mistakes and they really couldn't afford many this time around.
That's why he elected to trust Morala. The confidence it showed in the mission would bolster the rest of the bridge staff and in the end, they'd succeed. He had absolute faith in his people. They hadn't let him down before and considering the opposition, he doubted he had anything to worry about.

***

The Gnosis popped out of hyperspace, just on the edge of the system. Zach called out that shields and weapons were online. Salina reported

their position and that the Stalwart was already there and powered up for battle. Desmond put a tactical display on the main view screen, showing the position of enemy vessels in the sector.
“Stalwart reports,” Salina said, “they are prepared to engage. Their pilots are prepared to sweep the ground ahead of the marines.”
Vincent added, “Our pilots are in their ships and ready for takeoff. I’d recommend closing on the planet before we launch the shuttles or the fighters. Save them both some flight time and fuel.”
“Agreed,” Desmond said. “Zach, plot a course for the planet and ahead full. Salina, are the enemy ships moving to engage?”
“Not as of yet, sir,” Salina replied. “The Stalwart is making a move toward them though. It doesn’t look like they intend to give them a chance to fire first.”
“They’re taking the initiative,” Desmond replied. “We’ll focus on our task of getting people down there to start searching for the Orb. Once they’re in place, we can help. They’ll do their job so we can do ours. Cassie, can you scan the planet? If you locate what we’re after before we arrive, that would be a big bonus.”
“I’m scanning,” Cassie replied, “but the atmospheric disturbances are interfering. I’m adjusting my technique … but I think we’re going to have to be closer.” She paused. “I’m jamming all communications out of this sector. They can’t call for reinforcements now. Hm. That seems odd. There’s one signal that can almost cut through.”
“I see it,” Salina said. “That is strange. I’ll try to isolate it and figure out where it’s coming from. Oh. One of the enemy ships is hailing us, Captain. They’ve marked it urgent.
“Put it on speaker.”
“Earth vessel, this is Commander Arnel of the Kalrawv Group defense force. Explain this incursion into our space.”
“I’m Captain Desmond Bradford. We have business on the planet. Kindly pull your fleet back and allow us access to your facilities and we can avoid any form of violence.”
“Don’t be absurd,” Arnel scoffed. “There’s no way we’re going to allow you to enter our facilities uninvited. You and the Pahxin military vessel must withdraw at once or we will bring you both up on formal

charges. Clearly, this is an unauthorized mission and we will not be intimidated."
"We won't withdraw," Desmond said. "Please consider complying with our demands. I can't give you any time to consider it. If you want more, you might want to reach out to the other ship. Let us know if you change your mind. Bradford out." He cut the line himself.
"Anyone surprised?"
Vincent replied, "Only in that they haven't found the Orb yet … or even seem to know it's here."
"They might've taken it away already," Zach said. "If they found it that is."
"I don't think so," Cassie said. "I can't cut totally through the interference but there's definitely Orb technology down there."
"Good." Desmond nodded. "ETA to planet, Zach?"
"Eight minutes at present speed."
"That should be enough," Vincent said. "Permission to launch fighters and shuttles."
"Granted." Desmond leaned forward. "Make it happen. Operation starts now, folks. Salina, if any of those capital ships start our way, let us know. Otherwise, this is in the hands of the marines and the fighters for the time being. I hope they're all ready."
"Strange," Salina said. "That odd signal is gone. I couldn't isolate it before it shut off, but it definitely came from the facility."
"Maybe they did call for reinforcements," Vincent offered.
"Possibly but it's not like any of their other signals …" Salina shrugged. "Not like how they just communicated with us either."
"That is weird." Desmond sighed. "We don't have time to speculate about that though. How's the weather down there right now?"
"Chaotic," Cassie replied. "When we first arrived, they were dealing with hurricane winds but they've calmed down. There's a super tornado ravaging the southern hemisphere but that's nowhere near any of the inhabited areas. I hope our people can get indoors quickly. If we didn't have the power armor, the surface would be too risky to deploy troops."
"Good thing," Desmond said. "I'm sure they're thrilled to play around

in the wind. I'm going to leave that to them. Gabriel and Fielding have that part under control. I'm more curious about what happens up here at this point. Salina, focus on that odd signal while we've got some breathing room. Maybe we can figure that out even while we're busy."

***

When Fielding arrived, the marines were in the hangar to greet him. They were far more welcoming than he anticipated, even going so far as to cheer when he walked off the shuttle of his own accord. He joined them for a meal and listened to their recent endeavors and let them know what he'd be doing on the next mission.

They expressed excitement at having a field officer in charge instead of Gabriel. It had been a while since Darren led troops in battle and it showed when he gave orders. Fielding itched to go with them, to don the power armor and hit the planet's surface. The mission sounded insane but thrilling.

Dangerous surface conditions could work for and against them. The enemy wouldn't take to the surface if they could absolutely help it, but the marines didn't want to be out there more than they needed to be. Once they entered the facility, the real nightmare began: differentiating targets from civilian and military.

Fielding arrived in the command center a few minutes before the ship popped out of hyperspace. The marines were geared up and ready to go, waiting in the shuttle. He ran a coms test and settled in for the operation. Gabriel gave him some space, staying out of the operations center.

"You guys ready?" Fielding asked. "Heat, you sure you're good for this?"

"Yeah, that wound's fine," Heat replied. "Besides, the power armor keeps it in place. I won't have any problem doing my job. What about you? You certain you can talk with half an arm?"

"I've got a full arm, thank you very much." Fielding chuckled. "We don't have any way to friend or foe those people in there so be sure to check your targets. Hyperspace is dropping any second and I'm certain

we'll be launching shortly after that. Once we do, I'll do my best to offer guidance from here but I understand there's a lot of atmospheric interference."
"That means bad weather," Heat said. "For those of you who can't read officer."
The men laughed. A brief rattle took the ship as it emerged from hyperspace. Fielding noted they were to hold tight until the ship approached the planet's surface. That's going to make the guys anxious. "Okay, so we're closing in before you can go. I guess it makes sense. Don't want you flying around unnecessarily."
Fielding checked air support and they were also ready to go but on standby. Raptor squadron would bring the shuttles in and give them air support on the surface for as long as they could. Mustang planned on keeping ships away from the surface while the Stalwart engaged the bigger ships.
They didn't have long to wait. Fielding got the order that the ships were launching and he engaged the different camera feeds, bringing them up on his tactical screen. "Gillet's camera's glitching out. Can someone take a look? Please don't perform percussive maintenance on it. We don't have time for a replacement.
"I'm on it," Private Brock spoke up. "Um … looks fine. Hold on." A loud tap sounded over the microphone and the camera started working. "Better?"
"Did you hit it?" Fielding asked.
"I … caressed it," Brock said.
Fielding shook his head. "Yeah, it's back." He checked their distance to target. "You've got less than three minutes to touchdown. I've got you landing just north of the south entrance. Should be light security there and let you get inside in a hurry. Remember what we discussed. Do not go outside unless it's the only option."
"No beach time?" Anderson asked. "And this planet looks like such a garden spot."
"Yeah, no surfing today." Fielding paused. "You should be hitting atmosphere right about … now. Next time we talk, you'll be on the surface. Good luck, guys. I really doubt you're going to need it."

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Chapter 4

Heat didn't have to push too hard to go on the mission though he privately wondered if he was ready. Not physically. That part didn't bother him. After losing Gorman, he briefly wondered if he had it in him to get back into the field. There was only one way to find out and as he sat on the shuttle heading for the surface of the planet, he knew he made the right call.

"Two minutes to deployment." The pilot's voice came through his helmet. "Get ready. The wind's pretty heavy guys. I'm really fighting the stick on the way down."

The shuttle bounced around, buffeted by the weather. It dropped and got knocked to the side as thunder and lightning erupted all around them. Shields protected them from the worst of the storm, but Heat had no idea how the miners were able to work in those conditions. Just getting to their various sites must've been a nightmare.

I hope they're getting some serious pay.

"Opening back doors." The pilot still sounded calm, hardly moved by the situation. Those guys had the real nerves of steel. Marine pilots didn't receive enough credit for their resolve. When they dropped the marines off, they had to go off and remain close by for a quick pick up but out of the way of the storms with only a couple turrets to defend them.

The doors opened. Wind rushed into the cabin. Heat's HUD showed that the temperature was thirty-seven degrees Fahrenheit with strong winds, heavy rain and lightning. He glanced outside and had to smirk at the accuracy. He was fifth up and disengaged his safety harness to follow them out.

The first men out dashed for the nearby facility. Heat took half a moment to examine their surroundings. A barren landscape greeted them, stretching out to nearby hills. To their right, the facility they needed to breach, to the left, absolute nothingness. The place was practically dead. The fact it had any oxygen at all seemed like a total miracle.

“Door straight ahead!” Brock shouted. “Stacking up!”
“Form a perimeter,” Heat said, “while we get through the doors. We can’t just breach. Gillet, you’re on hack duty. Gor …” He stopped himself before he finished the name. “Vine, get a reading on this place. See if you can figure out when this God damn weather’s going to calm down a little bit.”
The rain hit harder, lowering their visibility considerably. No one tried to hinder them yet and that bothered him. Someone had to have seen the shuttles coming down on a scanner. If not on the surface, then up above. The Kalrawv Group had a decent sized fleet up there. What were they waiting for?
Maybe they’re not stupid enough to fight outside. Heat stepped over to Gillet. “Can you get us a scan of the inside before you open the door?”
“I’ll try to tap into security … but it doesn’t seem they have a lot of cameras in there.” Gillet glanced back at him. “It’s possible they’re right on the other side, waiting for us to breach.”
“That’s what I’m afraid of. Vine! Stop screwing around with the weather and find us another door.”
“But what’s wrong with that one?”
“It was too easy,” Heat said, “and that reminds me of your mom. Get your ass in gear and find another door! Take Anderson and Kelly with you. We’ll keep working here. Hurry up!”
The marines rushed off, keeping close to the building to avoid the worst of the storm. It seemed to be a long hallway, just big enough for some ten by ten rooms to line the walkway. He figured it must’ve been for storage of some sort. It certainly was far enough away from the center. The control rooms must’ve been in there.
Intelligence suggested they’d find evidence of the Orb in the computers or through scans. Since the Kalrawv Group hadn’t found it yet, they needed to do some probing to figure out exactly where it was. Heat worried they might have to do some digging and if that was the case, they’d have to occupy the place.
Holding the entire sector sounded like a nightmare but with soldiers from the Stalwart, they could at least batten down the facility for a

time. Then the real search would begin, and he didn't even want to contemplate how long that would take. Without any clue, without a direction to start, they could be down there for months.
"Gunny," Vine's voice broke through his thoughts. "We might've found another door … Yeah, it's a door. Whoa! Contact!"
Of course they'd find the action first. Heat grunted. "You guys got that? Report back, are you in control of that situation?"
"Four combatants!" Vine shouted. "They have some kind of beam weapons and they're taking pot shots from a window above us. We've got cover for the moment. Permission to engage?"
"Yeah, open up and tear them down. Those windows might represent an entry point. Be prepared to pop in! Go!" Heat paced away from the others. "Lieutenant, did you get any of that? Are you on com?"
"Interference … bad …" Fielding's voice crackled, garbled in some parts by the storm. "I'm … gain … working … should …"
"Damn." Heat sighed. "Coms are down with the ship, folks. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to join Vine, Anderson and Kelly. We'll try to get in through those windows. The rest of you stick with the plan. Hitting this place from two angles won't be a bad idea. Once we're in, we'll meet up near the entrance to the center."
Heat checked his HUD, noting the wind was far too crazy to engage his jump jets. He had to hoof it, rushing toward the sound of gunfire. The distinctive sound of the marine rifles barked over the odd wheezing from the enemy weapons. Remaining close to the wall, torrential rain pounded down on him, cutting visibility even further. Muzzle flashes helped light his way. Vine called out for Kelly to take a different position. A jetpack lit up, purple and gold in the gloom. Heat opened his mouth to tell him not to do it, but the wind already caught him. The light from his pack became a streak as Kelly slammed into the wall.
"Kelly!" Heat shouted, lifting his weapon to provide some cover. The private landed directly below the targets. All they had to do was lean out to shoot him.
An outline took shape in the gloom up above, someone leaning way out. Heat took a shot, picking up the pace. The shot caught the target

in the side and they disappeared back inside. The weather cleared for a moment, revealing Kelly as he tried to shove himself to his feet. Their opponents seemed to withdraw for a moment. Heat grabbed the Private and dragged him back to cover near Vine.

“You okay, Private?” Heat shouted.

“Yeah, Gunny,” Kelly muttered. “Just dazed.”

“You have got to keep an eye on the HUD, gentlemen.” Heat turned his attention to the window and aimed at it. “These winds could’ve swept you away from the building and then you would’ve been done. How many were up there, Vine?”

“At least three. I killed one for sure. Took him right in the face.”

“I got one too,” Anderson said. “That one you shot as you arrived was probably the only one left. Their weapons weren’t damaging the ground. I did a scan and I think they’re sonic.”

“What the hell would that do?” Heat asked.

“It could disrupt our armor,” Vine replied. “You know, vibrate the metal until it breaks at the seams or something. If we’re right about how powerful they are, then that’s no joke.”

“How would they …” Heat shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.” He paused, noting that the wind died down to a breezy twenty miles per hour. “I’m going for the window now. Cover me, guys. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to follow. We need to secure the area then head for the front.”

Heat engaged his pack and flew toward the window, keeping his weapon at the ready. He had to grab the edge and pull himself inside, using the power assisted hydraulics to haul the armor inside. The strange wheezing sound erupted to his left. A blast struck the ceiling near his head. He dropped to his side and opened up, firing several bursts in that direction.

A man dove for cover but at least two rounds caught him in the foot. He screamed but it didn’t deter him for long. He popped up, taking aim to fire again. Heat was ready, pulling the trigger just before his opponent could do the same. Three rounds tore through the man’s throat and face, making his head snap back and his body go limp to the floor.

Heat got to his feet and scanned the area. There was a door to his left, a hall to the right and some chairs scattered about the room. It must've been some kind of break area, but it didn't make a lot of sense considering it was in the middle of what they assumed was the storage wing.

"This area's clear, guys," Heat said. "Get in here. Gillet, you ready to breach?"

"Less than a minute," Gillet replied. "They definitely stacked up on the other side."

"Watch their weapons. Vine will explain them." Heat aimed down the hall, providing cover for the others to enter. The Kalrawv Group prepared for their arrival, only not in the most efficient manner possible. They might be able to hold the door for a couple of minutes at most, so what was the real play?

They have to be up to something, Heat thought. I guess we'll find out soon.

***

Squadron Leader Anna Jager's Charger squadron flew escort for the Gnosis, maintaining a sizable perimeter in the event of an enemy attack. It was not the most glamorous assignment, but it beat having to brave the terrible weather on the surface. Raptor squadron called in reports that they had to stay above a certain altitude or they'd be torn apart.

The weather conditions made it both worse and better for the shuttles. If the Raptor fighters couldn't go down there, they didn't have to worry about the enemies flying around either. That meant more action above the surface, leaving the marines to deal with any ground forces, effectively on their own.

Flight Lieutenant Preston Everest closed on her left, tightening their formation. He'd become the new second for Charger after their last mission. Preston received the promotion graciously but with a lot of solemnity. They all appreciated Flight Lieutenant Frank Maze and his loss was felt by all the pilots.

Preston switched to a private channel. “Mustang Squadron’s about to engage the enemy with the Pahxin fighters. I just got a private message from Lieutenant Alicia Quinn.” That young lady also received a promotion, moving up from Flying Officer. Her bravery more than proved her worthy of the rank and she deserved it for all she’d done.
“We’ve only faced these enemies once,” Anna said. “I’m curious how it’ll go.”
“You’ll get firsthand experience I think,” Preston replied. “Check scans … Our four o’clock.”
He indicated an area near the planet. Intelligence suggested the Kalrawv Group relied on capital ships to provide orbital support rather than erecting a space station. Pahxin authorities suggested it was because they intended to strip mine the place and wanted to remain mobile.
When the Gnosis first arrived in the system, the capital ships all appeared to be located well away from the planet itself, but Preston was right. A wing of fighters was definitely on approach in the opposite direction of their capital ships. “Something has to be hiding over there. Near the moon maybe? Or using the atmospheric interference to mask their sig.”
“Won’t be our problem yet,” Preston said. “I’d like permission to engage these guys.”
“Hold tight.” Anna checked the scanner, noting they had six ships incoming, evenly matching them. She switched to the open channel, addressing Commander Bowman. “Sir, we have ships on approach to the Gnosis from somewhere near the planet’s surface. We would like permission to engage.”
“Granted,” Bowman replied. “Keep them back. We’re still trying to support the ground units and any distance will cut into our ability to perform scans or communicate. Good luck, Charger.”
“You heard the man, folks,” Anna said. “Follow my lead and we’ll meet this threat head on.”
She altered course, cutting down and below the Gnosis. The others formed up behind her in a loose vanguard. Scans came back about their enemies, offering a little insight into their capabilities. They

were not the same types of ships they faced before but somewhat smaller. Engines suggested speed and their shields afforded a strong defense.

Scans didn't provide a reasonable look at their weapons though, and that's what Anna had been most curious about.

I wonder if these are the same as the ones flying around the capital ships. The Kalrawv Group were not a military. They didn't need to resort to specific models of weapons or vehicles. Instead, they could rely on whatever the best deal was or even go for completely different models based on situations.

From what little Anna knew of their organization, they built their own equipment and relied on internal factories to churn out their gear. She hoped that meant they'd do a great deal in an effort to preserve their ships but after their previous encounter with them, it was obvious they were nearly as zealous as the Tol'An.

Anna didn't understand what compelled them. It couldn't have been money, no one fought to the death like that over a mere paycheck and it wasn't patriotism. The Kalrawv Group didn't represent a country or world. The only thing left was some sort of threat, either to their families or their own lives.

Even still, those they fought on an earlier mission essentially sacrificed themselves out in the middle of nowhere. There must've been some alternative, something they could've done but without understanding their circumstances, it was impossible to guess. Maybe the Pahxin could help shed some light on what motivated them.

Some other time.

Anna noted they were less than thirty seconds from firing range. The enemy hadn't altered their course and continued charging forward, practically playing chicken. "Looks like we're going to exchange a first pass," she announced. "Reinforce your forward shields." She noted that Flying Officer Jonny Calloway was on the far left of the formation. "Jonny?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Break formation and flank them. Give them a reason to separate."

Anna scowled. "I'm hoping they don't have the discipline of an actual

military. If that's the case, we'll have a distinct advantage when they get thrown into chaos."

Jonny swept out and away just as the first bit of ordnance started to fly.

Blasts from the enemy ships cut through space, bright green beams that remained visible for mere seconds. They were infinitely faster than Tol'An, near instant. Anna fired her weapons, discharging both beams and mass drivers. Her shields registered hits she didn't see, a half dozen before she darted past her opponents and finished the exchange.

Sweat covered her brow and she glanced at how her defenses were doing. Shields took a serious pounding from their strange beam weapons. Even with reinforcement, the attacks dropped them to sixty-five percent. What was worse, they weren't recharging as quickly as normal. Something about the attacks disrupted the generator.

"Did anyone else take any real damage?" Anna banked hard, preparing for the dogfight to come. She circled around in time to see Jonny make a run at one of the fighters, blasting it with a full barrage of cannon fire. The enemy's shields glittered green and gold, splashing with every hit. It made the pilot spin and dive, attempting to avoid further contact.

That would lead me to believe we can get through those.

"I'm down to seventy-percent," Preston said. "Seems like my generator really took a beating there."

Flying Officer Bella Graves confirmed, "I'm down to ninety and it's not going back up."

"No damage," Flying Officer Simon Gell reported. "Shields still at one-hundred percent and I'm engaging now."

Anna followed suit, coming around to find a firing solution on the nearest target. He cut to the left, banking to avoid letting her catch his tail. Pulling up hard, the inertial dampeners whined, and her body was crammed into her seat, nearly taking the wind out of her. She pulled the trigger, hoping to force her opponent back in her range. The shots cleanly missed but the Kalrawv pilot must've thought they were closer. He pulled a barrel roll and ended up flying to her right,

an easy maneuver for her to get into position. As she came around, she engaged her beam weapons, pounding his rear shields for a few moments before he pulled away.

Sparks danced over his hull, racing up the stubby tail wings and all the way up toward the cockpit. Parts of his ship began to move, rotating from the front to the back. What the hell? Anna squinted for a moment before she realized exactly what was happening. Oh no. She climbed half a second too late to avoid a blast that caught her on the bottom.

Shields dropped to forty percent from the blow. “They can rotate their weapons!” She shouted into the com. “Be careful of that!”

“They’re just like our beam weapons,” Preston added. “No recoil so they could technically fire from any angle they might have.”

Anna spun into a dive. She’d lost her target temporarily but caught him on scans a moment later, breaking away from the conflict.

“Where the hell is he going?” A thought occurred to her. “The Gnosis is jamming coms. I’m following this guy in case he calls for reinforcements.”

“We’ll hold it here,” Preston said. “But don’t go too far. He could be leading you into a trap.”

Anna engaged her afterburners, dropping low. She started to gain but it would be a few moments before she could fire again. He was too far out of range for any of her weapons. If he was heading back for help, she had no idea how far he had to go. There were no larger blips on her scans still.

But either way, she’d catch up to him long before he passed the planet and then, he’d be done.

***

The Stalwart fell into position, charging the enemy ranks. A com signal came through from the Kalrawv Group. Ulian turned to Viran, who related that it was an urgent request for a parlay. Morala’s eyes narrowed for a long moment before she finally nodded, gesturing to put it on the view screen.

A Pahxin man with dark hair wearing a Kalrawv suit appeared, his eyes wide with fury. He seemed to be trembling and his cheeks were dark red. He drew a deep breath before speaking, clearly attempting to calm down before he addressed them.
“What is the meaning of this invasion?” He demanded. “I’ve already spoken to your lackey and they directed me to you. I demand to understand why you are here and what makes you think you can attack us like this! You have no legal right to assault a Kalrawv installation! I can only assume you are a rogue ship!”
“Hold your tongue,” Morala said. “We know this is not a legal mining operation. You’re out here on the fringe, scavenging so that you don’t have to pay taxes on whatever you find. This is strip mining, plain and simple. You have no right to be here, no permit for the action and no intention of telling anyone about it.
“We are here on business from the Pahxin government. You do have the right to stand down and surrender, but we both know that’s not going to happen.”
“Outrageous! Pahxin military thugs!” The Kalrawv man shook his head. “I will file a grievance about this!”
“Will you?” Morala asked. “On what grounds, exactly? You’re destroying that planet. That breaks four different laws of our people, which your company agreed to uphold. Shall I cite them for you? Would you like us to transmit them for a refresher? In exactly thirty-five seconds, my ship is going to open fire. Do you surrender?”
“I do not!" The Kalrawv man shouted. “We will destroy your vessel and there will be no trace of you, or us, when anyone comes looking.”
“We filed this attack plan with our government,” Morala said. “They know you’re out here now. If by some miracle you survive this encounter and destroy us, the military will know all about it. Your only real hope is to give up now and let us conduct our operation with your full cooperation.”
“You weren’t even going to contact us before you attacked!”
“I’ve dealt with you before,” Morala replied. “I’ve never seen you give up yet.”
“And we won’t today. This is your grave, military dog!” The

connection was cut.
Morala turned to Erda. “Do the honors of starting the engagement. Fire when ready.”
“Yes, ma’am.”
Ulian agreed with her assessment. She handled the dialogue about as well as anyone could, considering the audience. Kalrawv tended to only be cooperative when they were getting their way. Any other conversation ended pretty much the way Morala’s did. They were like spoiled children holding handguns.
Willing to use them, not necessarily trained but incredibly dangerous all the same.
Kalrawv fielded eight capital ships in the area, seven destroyer class and one battleship. They held some potential for causing trouble, but the Stalwart was more than a match for them. The armaments on board alone were enough to devastate twice as many smaller vessels. Despite that, Ulian worried about tricks.
High-end weapons were Kalrawv’s wheel house. They employed experimental equipment all the time, field testing them rather than wasting time in the lab. There was a good chance the Stalwart would encounter such things during the engagement, potentially something they had not accounted for.
When asked about it, Morala explained the obvious. They’d have to deal with such things as they came up. There was no way to predict the utterly unpredictable. So they charged in, targeting the nearest threats in the destroyers and allowing Erda to open fire. The first assault was a barrage of energy fire, cutting through space and flashing in the view screen.
Morala leaned forward, watching the screen intently. The attack took less than ten seconds to reach the target and shields flared so brightly, Ulian had to look away for a moment. Viran called out that they scored a direct hit. “Enemy shields on that vessel have dropped completely. They are wide open.”
“Hit them again,” Morala said. “All turrets open fire.” She turned to Morala. “Has the enemy dispatched fighters? Are our ships engaging?”
“Yes, ma’am,” Viran confirmed. “They have started the battle. Our

human allies are joining them to assist." She sighed. "Ma'am, I'm picking up four larger vessels on scans. Possibly bombers but they're a silhouette I haven't seen before. It's not in the database at least. Isn't that illegal?"
"It is," Ulian replied. "They're supposed to register all new ships with the military before deploying them."
"They're hoping we'll be destroyed so it won't matter," Morala said. "Instruct our fighters to engage those larger vessels. I don't want them near the Stalwart. Erda, have you been able to get the turrets to fire yet?"
"Target is almost locked, ma'am." Erda clicked his tongue. The ship turned, moving fast enough to cause some discomfort on the bridge. Ulian held tight to his hand rests, waiting as patiently as he could.
"Firing now!"
The turrets discharged, making a muffled whirring sound off to their right. Each shot made the turret whine as it charged up the battery and let the bolt fly. Twenty total beams hammered the destroyer, tearing through the hull and punching chunks out of it. The enemy vessel began to drift then exploded in a spectacular ball of blue energy.
"One down," Erda said. "Six to go. They're returning fire."
"This will be the test," Morala said. "We'll find out just how powerful they are and if we should be worried. Evasive maneuvers, Erda. Don't make it too easy for them." She turned to Ulian. "Opinion?"
"You're doing fine," Ulian replied. "At least as well as I would be at this point. Keep it up and don't let them have a breath. I suppose my biggest concern is their battleship … and why it hasn't engaged with us yet."
"Perhaps they have to charge something up."
"Hyperspace," Ulian suggested. "They might want to get out of here. The only reason I don't believe that though is the prize on this planet. Not the Trindisha … but the ore they're collecting. I think they'd be hard pressed to abandon it. Regardless of how obvious their end might be."
"Agreed." Morala turned to the screen, scowling. Beam attacks rushed

toward the Stalwart, attacks from each of the remaining destroyers. They slammed into the starboard side, causing the ship to rumble and shake.

Viran cried out as she was jostled in her seat. The others fared better. Morala asked for a damage report but didn't get it right away. Ulian glanced back and saw the young woman shaking her head, tapping the controls. The attack managed to daze her, but she appeared to be okay.

"Looks like …" Viran cleared her throat before continuing. "I don't know how they've done this. That was concussion damage. They hit us with beams and it was like being rammed. It should've only damaged our shields … but instead, it didn't even scratch them. We have minor hull damage on several points along the side."

Morala hummed. "Thank you. Now we know. Their weapons are not entirely conventional. All the more reason to finish them off, catalog the results and report to high command about their efforts."

"One step at a time," Ulian replied. "Those bombers might even be worse."

"Get me a com link to our pilots," Morala said. "I want to reinforce the need to take care of those immediately. Erda, target the next ship and open up. Take another one out before they fire again. Vira, find out what it will take for repair crews to get us back up to one hundred percent. Move. This is a time for efficiency above all else."

Not exactly inspiring, Ulian thought, but it could've been worse. At least she's got the whole conflict in her head at once. That trick took me a long time to learn. So far so good, Morala. I'm impressed. Keep it up and you just might have that command you're so desperate for after all.

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Chapter 5

Gizan found the officer in charge asleep in his bed. He crept up beside the bed, pressing his hand over the man's mouth before sliding his knife across the man's throat. The target woke, gurgling and struggling for only a brief moment before convulsing his way to a quick, painful death.

This man may not have been the highest-ranking officer in the facility but he held enough importance to be worth stealing his key card. Gizan rifled through the room until he found it and the man's tablet. Grabbing both, he paused before the bed, staring down in contemplation.

The facility didn't look like a normal Kalrawv construction. It was all too low tech and the amenities didn't match the typical comforts the decadent employees tended to require. Perhaps they merely renovated a research base, or it could've even been there since the previous planet inhabitants lived there.

Researchers would have killed for the opportunity to explore the planet, to catalog the wonders of the weather while excavating for buried treasure. Gizan doubted the Kalrawv Group discovered the planet on their own. They likely learned about it then kicked those out who got their first.

Typical. Gizan slipped out of the room and headed for the control center. He approached two guards standing in front of a door. They looked bored, hardly paying any attention to their duties. Neither of them even looked up when Gizan paused before them, within easy striking distance.

He held the knife backward in his right hand. Finally, his close proximity roused the guards. The one on the left looked up. Gizan lashed out and covered his mouth, slashing the other across the throat. Hands lifted to cover the wound as he wheezed out a wet gasp and dropped to the ground.

The other man reached for his gun but before he could clear it from the holster, Gizan slammed the knife into the side of his head, straight

through the ear. The man twitched, eyes rolling back in his head before he collapsed to the ground.

His weapon remained lodged in the man's skull and he couldn't get it out easily. He took one of the guard's pistols then used the stolen security card to open the door, revealing flashing panels and tall computer banks. A man and a woman were at work, tapping at the console. They both looked in his direction, confusion washing over them.

Gizan didn't know if it was the fact they didn't recognize him or that he was covered in blood. They were nearly ten feet away. Their eyes moved to his weapon. He took aim. Both lifted their hands, eyes widening. He wasn't familiar with that particular gun, how it worked or what it would do to his targets if he pulled the trigger.

"Stand." Gizan spoke in a low, menacing voice. The man got up instantly, the woman smacked her knee on the console, wincing before she was able to leave the chair. They exchanged nervous looks before the male stepped forward, pursing his lips. His skin went deathly pale.

"Sir," he began, "my name's Dak and this is Jayla. I don't know what it is you want but please, do whatever you need to do. We won't stop you. We … we just work here. Neither of us has any particular need to stand in the way of … this."

"Are you not employed by the Kalrawv Group?" Gizan asked. "Because I was under the impression you people fought to the death … too afraid of your supervisors to risk failure. Or in this case, capture."

Jayla cleared her throat. "I'm just a computer contractor. I don't have a full-time deal with Kalrawv."

"Me either," Dak said. "We're here for three months and then, the job's over. We go home."

Gizan wasn't entirely sure what to do with them. Normally, he would've just killed the two and moved on, but time spent in the cell made him second guess his typical tactics. These unarmed civilians would not likely cause him much grief. If he secured them, they could live through their experience.

Or at least have the same chance as any of the other Kalrawv representatives once the situation became dire.
Gizan narrowed his eyes just as Dak lunged for him, grabbing his wrist. The weapon was turned toward the wall as they began to struggle. A twitch of the finger discharged it into the wall and it wheezed, splashing a strange beam against the metal. What would that have done to a man?
Dak elbowed him in the chest but without enough force to hurt. Gizan kneed Dak's side twice then shoved him back, following up with a kick to the groin. Dak dropped to the ground but found an inner reserve of strength, throwing himself forward to tackle Gizan around the waist.
They both stumbled back against the door. Gizan brought the weapon down sharply against Dak's spine, hammering him three times before his grip loosened. Kneeing him in the stomach, Dak dropped to the ground and Gizan aimed the weapon at him, pulling the trigger once. A yellow blast hit him, causing his body to tremble violently before he spit up blood all over the floor. Dak was dead in an instant. Jayla screamed, covering her mouth with both of her hands.
Gizan aimed the weapon at her, breathing heavily. "I was going to let you both live before this fool attacked me."
"I have no intention of messing with you, sir." Tears streaked Jayla's cheeks. "Please … just … What do you want me to do?"
"Come here." Gizan demanded. Jayla whimpered but did as she was told, approaching tentatively. When she stood in front of him, she began to tremble, tears flowing freely. He roughly took her by the arm, spinning her around so she faced away from him.
"Please … Please don't … Don't hurt me. I … I didn't … I didn't do … anything … to you …"
"Hush." Gizan whacked the back of her head, knocking her to the floor. She landed on the body of Dak, making a sickening squish sound before falling unconscious. He stepped over them then took a seat, familiarizing himself with the controls. They were fairly standard, employing the same OS as other Kalrawv devices.
Gizan started to scan the planet for signs of the Trindisha technology.

While it started the process, he prepared a signal for his Tol'An allies. By the time they arrived, he figured he would know how to complete their objective. Depending on what sort of fight the Kalrawv security forces put up, they may be done soon.

Several blips appeared on the scanner, drawing his attention. He tilted his head, bringing up the details of the find. A Pahxin battleship and another vessel entered the system and deployed fighters. He brought the silhouette of the second craft up, making his eyes bulge in surprise.

The Gnosis! He would never forget that ship's look nor the name. These two were responsible for his fall from grace, for all the doubt in his head. They pushed him to it and left with his prisoners. Their daring actions managed to end a scheme which would've brought both cultures to their knees.

Much as Gizan wanted to seek vengeance against them, he did not have the time nor the resources to do so. He needed to focus on the task at hand: get the Trindisha and escape. Kalrawv would keep them busy while he conducted his operation. And when his people arrived, if they were swift, they'd be able to get in and out under the blanket of chaos.

This might not be a bad thing after all. Gizan tried to remain calm. After what the two ships pulled off last time he met them, he couldn't assume they would be easy opponents. The only reason they could possibly be there was to take the Trindisha. In that, they were once again direct adversaries in a race against time.

Alright then. We'll match wits again, humans. Gizan directed his gaze to the window, peering up at the raging sky. Bring yourselves down here and we shall see who is greater … and who deserves the prize.

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Gillet struggled to disengage the locking mechanism on the door. Each time he got close to figuring out the code, it scrambled as if it was on some kind of randomizer. Then he realized someone on the other side was opposing him. They were keeping the door locked by changing

the information whenever he nearly got there.
“Screw this.” He stepped back. “Get to cover and rocket the hell out of it.”
“What?” Brock asked. “Are you sure?”
“Yeah, I’m sure. We don’t have time to play games.” Gillet waved and shouted. “Fall back!” They retreated nearly fifty feet from the door. “That thing’s tough so everyone, give it a single rocket. Should be enough to punch right through and get us inside. Plus, those assholes waiting for us will be in for one hell of a surprise.”
The marines fired their rockets, sending them streaking through the air. They moved swiftly, defying the moderate winds and pounding their target, tearing a hole in the wall and knocking down the door. People screamed inside, shock and pain mingling. Gillet charged forward, shouting for his men to follow him in.
Wheezing blasts filled the air, the Kalrawv security team blind fired into the breached wall. Gillet returned fire, spraying bullets into the chamber not twenty feet before entering the building. Heat’s voice came shouting over the speakers, demanding to know what just happened.
Private Erskin hit the ground to Gillet’s left, crying out. Private Howards hit the wall just inside the breach. Body parts from their opponents littered the ground, though it was impossible to tell how many were dead in the heat of the battle.
Gillet took aim and shot at a target stumbling to the right, moving into the hallway. He caught him in the stomach. The blow made the man spin in place and drop to the ground, blood soaking the metal floor.
More chaos reigned around him, yellow energy beams slapping the walls and rifles barking as they blasted away. Gillet tried to identify another target, but the carnage seemed to be calming down. A couple bursts from his men made him twitch, ducking for a moment before approaching his two downed soldiers.
“Erskin,” Gillet shouted into his com. “You still with us?”
“Yes, sir,” Erskin muttered, shoving himself to his feet. “They hit me in the shoulder with that … that energy beam. It disrupted my

circuits, but they rebooted. I seem to be fine."
"Run a diagnostic to be sure." Gillet turned to Howards and stopped before speaking. He'd taken a blow to the head. Blood and chunks sat beneath his helmet, enough that indicated he was dead the moment it made contact. "Jesus Christ … Mark down Howards as KIA."
"What the hell?" Heat shouted. "What happened, Gillet?"
"We're inside," Gillet replied. "We're moving in your direction. Howards is down but we're otherwise okay. I've seen what those sonic weapons can do now. We definitely want to avoid contact with them." He looked back at Howards. "More than you can possibly guess. Poor guy."
"We've secured the area!" Erskin called out. "We're ready to move."
"We're on our way to you," Gillet said. "Coming up from your six so please don't shoot at us when we get close."
"Your stunt made the whole facility shake," Heat replied. "You might want to hurry so we're not fighting a pitch battle in close quarters. It won't be pleasant."
"No problem, Gunny." Gillet checked his ammo and led the way. "We'll pick up the pace."

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Cassie grunted, slapping the console. Even though they were near orbit with the planet, scans were not able to break through the atmospheric interference. She tried a dozen different techniques to compensate for the noise, but they needed a booster on the surface to make it happen.
She even tried to hack into the Kalrawv network in an effort to use their equipment to help but they weren't broadcasting a powerful enough signal to maintain the connection. She needed the marines to get into the system. If she had access to their computers, if they were sending a strong enough signal, the planetary scans would be possible.
"Captain," Cassie said, "I need to send a message to the marines. Without their help, I won't be able to find the Orb from up here."
"Weather?" Desmond asked.

“That and more,” Cassie replied. “The static electricity from the clouds alone is enough to throw our instruments for a loop. We could drop to a lower orbit, but I can’t guarantee that will be enough. Really, it comes down to the marines.”
“We needed to give them a clear objective of where to go,” Desmond said. “Okay, talk to Fielding. He's got operational command of the mission.”
“Thanks.” Cassie contacted ground operations and the line connected right away.
“This is Fielding.”
“Lieutenant, Agent Alexander here. I need your guys to take the control center down there to help me establish a link to their systems. The interference is too great for our scans to punch through.”
“I’d love to let them know,” Fielding replied, “but communications are down. Standard procedure at this point would be to find a way to connect up with us. In that case, they should already be on your request.”
“Thank you.” Cassie frowned. “So not even communications are getting through? We tight beam that too. Maybe our jamming is causing the problem. I’ll look into it. Thank you, Lieutenant.”
She killed the connection and moved over to Salina, keeping her voice low. “They can’t talk to the surface and we can’t deep scan either. I know we’re jamming the system to prevent them from reaching out for reinforcements. Is there a chance that’s impacting our systems as well? Some sort of anomaly due to that terrible weather?”
Salina sighed, wearing a perplexed expression. “I don’t think so. Or at least, I wouldn’t think it should. To be honest, we’re treading on new territory here. It’s not like we’ve jammed a whole system before. But …” She snapped her fingers. “You know, I think the Stalwart is blasting the capital ships over there.”
“The combination of all three?” Cassie asked.
“Maybe. I’ll talk to Chief Webber and see if he’s got any ideas about it.”
“I’ll see what I can do.” Cassie shook her head as she returned to her station. “Though I’ve already gone through several options.”

“We’ve got incoming,” Zach said. “Kalrawv destroyer moving in from around the other side of the planet.” He paused. “They’re on an intercept course with us.”
“I thought it was too quiet over here,” Desmond muttered. “Bring us around and charge up the batteries. Full power to the shields.”
“But if we have the shields up,” Cassie said, “that’s another layer of interference we have to get through. I can’t scan through that.”
“Then maybe we should get you down there,” Desmond replied. “If you join the marines, you’ll be able to do the scans from the surface, find the Orb and assist with its extraction.”
“She doesn’t have power armor,” Vincent said. “And how would she get down there?”
Desmond turned to him. “Send a bomber. They’re tough enough to handle that weather and better armed than any of the shuttles.”
“Captain …” Vincent seemed ready to continue to argue so Cassie stepped in.
“I’ll do it. But I have to hurry. If we’re about to enter combat, I need to be off the ship before they get here and start in with the shooting.”
“There you go,” Desmond said. “She’s ready for action, Vincent. See to it that the bombers are prepared to launch. We can have them come back up and help with this destroyer when they’ve dropped her off.”
Vincent stood, moving to her station and leaning close. He kept his voice down, practically whispering. “You don’t have to do this. It’s not your job. We can … send a technician. Seriously. Don’t go.”
“I’m the one who knows what to look for when it comes to the Orb,” Cassie said. “There’s not enough time to explain it to someone else. It’s not like they can be on the com.”
“I don’t like it.”
“I know.” Cassie smiled as she stood. “I’ll be back soon. You’d better contact Rhino and let them know to be ready.” She headed to the elevator. “Captain, I’ll try to establish communications as soon as I can. Good luck up here.” She waved at Vincent as the doors closed.
She headed down to get geared up for the trip and drew a deep breath, steadying herself. Vincent was right, she didn’t have to go. She could’ve even pulled rank if necessary. There wasn’t anyone else who

could do it. Without heading to the planet, they delayed the mission until the marines secured the facility.
That required time they didn't have. So now I get to see how bad weather can really get. Cassie smirked. I doubt I'll complain much about rain back home after this. Gotta take the small things, right?

***

Squadron Leader Nolan Coplan and his bomber unit went on standby the moment the Gnosis emerged from hyperspace. He didn't expect to launch, not after the briefing he attended but when he received an urgent communication request from the bridge, he figured the battlefield must've changed.
He established the link to Commander Bowman. "Yes, sir?"
"Hi Nolan," Bowman began, "I've got some bad news. I need your unit to scramble right away. We've got an incoming capital ship we're about to engage and we'll need some bomber support."
"Okay, we can get out there right away."
"There's more," Bowman said. "I need you to bring a passenger to the surface on an urgent mission."
That's the bad news, Nolan thought. "Um … are you serious?"
"Unfortunately, I am. You'll be taking Agent Alexander down to the planet and dropping her off so she can rendezvous with the marines."
"But I heard the weather patterns are insane." Nolan pressed a hand against his face before continuing. "Yes, sir. When will she be down here?"
"She's on her way now. Get your ships prepped and launch as soon as possible." Bowman paused again but something in silence suggested he had more to say. When he spoke again, he lowered his voice, just above a whisper. "I'd really appreciate it if you could ensure a smooth and safe deployment of the agent, Nolan."
"Absolutely, sir," Nolan said. "I'll do everything in my power to make it okay."
"Thank you. Bowman out."
Rumors floated around that Bowman and Alexander had a thing

together, but he didn't know if was true. Nolan didn't have any sort of pulse on the activities of the officers but that last moment, the little request, spoke of something outside a professional concern. Consider that chatter confirmed.

Nolan let the rest of the team know what was coming. He initiated the startup process for his ship then dropped the ramp in the back for Agent Alexander. She'd have to ride in the small hold, which fortunately for her had seats. There were four in total, each practically on top of the other. Four passengers would have to be cozy.

One would probably find it dark and isolated. The cockpit was located up two stairs and obscured from view by the ceiling. She wouldn't have visibility on Nolan and would only have coms to keep her company. There weren't any windows down there either, which was probably for the best considering the weather.

Flight Lieutenant Micah Zane approached, wearing a strange expression. "Hey, what's going on? What's with the ramp?"

"I have a quick side gig to take care of before I can join you guys," Nolan said. "But don't worry, you'll be fine while I'm gone."

"I'm not worried about myself," Micah said. "But going down there … I mean, Raptor said it was nuts. They had to take to high altitude. There's no way enemy fighters are cruising around down there due to the fierce winds."

"That's good news for me, right?" Nolan grinned. "Means no one's going to be shooting at me."

Micah shook his head. "Sometimes, you're a little insane. You know that, right?"

"Aren't we all?" Nolan saw Agent Alexander enter the hangar. "Sorry, Micah. My passenger is here. You're in charge until I get back."

"See you later, sir." Micah walked away, shaking his head.

Agent Alexander replaced him, standing at the bottom of the ramp. Her dark brown hair was tied back in a tight ponytail and she wore a black tactical suit. A rifle hung from her left shoulder, a pistol rested low on her right leg and she carried a satchel which looked fairly heavy from the way it strained the strap.

"Hello." Nolan stepped down and shook her hand. "I'll be your pilot

this afternoon. Welcome aboard Rhino Air." He gestured for her to step aboard. "Today there will be no inflight movie, so I do apologize for that but we do have an excellent seat with no visibility and just enough cushion to make it seem like we've heard about comfort before."

Alexander chuckled. "Thank you. I appreciate you doing this."

"It's my pleasure, Agent Alexander. Sort of."

"Cassie," she said. "Please, you can call me Cassie."

"In that case, you can call me Nolan." He gestured to the safety straps. "You'll want to make sure those are securely fastened before we go and put in an earpiece or you'll be down here all alone in the dark. Believe me, it's way too creepy for that. We had to check it out during our initial flight training with these bad boys and I didn't like it."

"Something tells me this won't be flying the friendly skies," Cassie said.

"From what I understand," Nolan replied, "and no bullshit, we're about to go to the most angry skies either of us has ever seen. But … this ship's pretty robust. She should make it without too much trouble. Just hang on tight, and trust that I've been doing this for a very long time."

"I will." Cassie secured her equipment then sat down, pulling on the seat belt.

Nolan crawled into the cockpit and lifted the ramp. His ship was powered up and ready to go. Tower clearance came through before he even asked. He lifted off and moved toward the exit. "Hey, tower," he said, grinning, "it's almost like you want to get rid of me or something. I feel like I should be offended."

"Cut the chatter, Rhino One," Warrant Officer Vernon replied. He'd been on tower control since the Gnosis hadn't done more than moved about space near Earth orbit. He held a familiar relationship with all of the pilots on board, which meant they took his gruff disposition in stride.

Nolan watched his scanner, calling out that he cleared the hangar bay force field and was setting course for the surface. Wish me luck guys, he thought. Voicing it would only make his passenger nervous.

Peering at their destination, his shoulders slumped. The storms were clearly visible from orbit.

That place is like the ninth circle of hell. Nolan shook his head. “Here we go, Agent. Looks like we’ve got … two minutes to atmosphere and then … I don’t know what to expect from that point on. Reports say the weather changes frequently and without warning so let’s just hope we catch a window. Otherwise …”

“Yes?” Cassie asked.

“Well, we’re going to experience some slight turbulence on our way into Hellweather Airport.” Nolan smirked. “Shields will protect us against the lightning, if that becomes a problem, but I’m more worried about these winds. My scans are showing they’re near hurricane levels in some parts.”

“That’s what I understand,” Cassie said. “Wait! I can try to plot a safe path down to the facility! Put together a course that cuts around the worst of the storms.”

“I’m way ahead of you,” Nolan replied, “but thanks for the offer.”

“Sorry …” Cassie cleared her throat after the word. He imagined her blushing, which was definitely a pleasing visual. He understood why Commander Bowman took an interest. The woman was beautiful. How she caught planet duty was beyond him but whatever bit of bad luck had sent her down to hang out with the marines drifted Nolan’s way too.

They hit atmosphere, cutting through a reasonable window to avoid burn up. The shields lit up in front of him, glowing red and blue. His ship began shaking, subtly at first then more violently the further down he went. Gripping the flight stick with his right hand, he worked the throttle with his left.

“Are we in the storm?” Cassie called out. Now she was scared, he could hear it in the pitch of her voice.

“No, I’m afraid not.” Nolan kept his own tone calm even as adrenaline rushed through him. “We’re about … thirty seconds from encountering our first natural event. Right now, it looks like it’ll be smooth until the surface but this planet might have another idea for us. Okay, I need to concentrate now.”

Nolan hit the first set of clouds and an alarm went off, indicating high winds. Rain pounded the vessel, glancing off the shields. Without them, his cockpit would've been covered in beads and streaks. Visibility was terrible, not even five miles out. A particular strong gale struck him from the left, knocking him a good three hundred feet off course.

That's the stuff, right there. Nolan corrected his course, ensuring they were still on the right path. Thunder erupted around them, a great crash that made his ears ring. Something flashed to his left, likely lightning and he instinctually veered away from the blast. How far down do these clouds go?

He checked the altimeter and noted they still had twenty-thousand feet to descend. Apparently, I don't do enough trans-atmospheric flight. The fact was, he didn't know exactly how the clouds should be. He hadn't flown on Earth for a few years. Another heavy gust brought his thoughts back to the moment, tossing them another few hundred feet to the left.

This is intense. Nolan noticed a tinge in his stomach, some reaction to the sudden motions. He only registered it peripherally, but his passenger might've been losing her lunch in a major way. He wondered if it was the time to let her know they didn't have any barf bags on board … which meant if she did get sick, he would be stuck with it for the rest of the mission.

Oh well. That's how it goes sometimes.

Nolan cut through the clouds and saw the wasteland beneath him. Gray-brown nothingness spread out as far as the eye could see, broken up only by the facility they were heading toward. He altered course to get to the rear, moving swiftly toward the drop off point. It reminded him of a post-apocalyptic movie. The isolation alone gave him the creeps.

And people work down here! Lightning slammed into the roof of the ship, causing another alarm. He checked, noting the shields had fully absorbed the blow. Another bout of thunder hit, then more rain. The ship was battered around far worse, shaking like it was having an absolute fit.

Nolan struggled to steady her, but he couldn't do it. All he could do was control the descent with thrusters. He'd definitely be talking to the shuttle pilots about how they brought their vehicles down without incident. Those things were far less maneuverable than the bomber and Nolan really had to fight.

The altimeter showed he had less than five thousand feet. He tried to slow down but the wind wasn't having any of it. He was being shoved, forced down at an alarming rate. Diverting power to the engines, he kicked on full retro rockets. The ship began to slow but he was pressed hard into his safety harness.

Another lightning blast hit him, this time cutting straight through the shields. Instruments went haywire and his computer shut down. The altimeter was not digital and still allowed him to see they were only eight hundred feet from landing. He pulled the nose up and dropped the landing gear, hitting the ground hard enough to be jostled about.

"Cassie," Nolan shouted into the com. He disengaged his safety harness and headed down into the hold. "Are you okay?"

She looked up at him, face pale with a slight green tinge. She held up a thumb, offering a weak smile. "I didn't throw up … through some miracle."

"That's something to be proud of." Nolan motioned toward the door. "When you're ready, I'll pop the hatch. I have to conduct some repairs before I can get out of here."

"What happened?"

He explained how diverting power to the engines weakened the shields enough for the lightning to get through. "My systems are wonky so hopefully I can get them back online before I head up to help with the fight. Anyway, that's not your problem. I've got turrets to keep bad guys away. Just go. Do what you've got to do."

"Thank you." Cassie put her backpack on and grabbed her rifle. "I appreciate you doing this."

"Gotta be honest," Nolan said while tapping the button to open the ramp, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world, huh? See you later, Agent. Good luck."

Cassie looked out at the rain and leaned to see where she was going

before dashing off.

Nolan closed the ship up, engaged his automated defenses and took a moment to look around his surroundings. “Okay, then. Nothing quite like trying to fix your ship in the middle of a storm on a hostile planet. Good times. Commander Bowman should be a travel agent when he retires. I’m definitely making that recommendation … if I ever get home.”

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Chapter 6

Anna Jager closed on her target, keeping a wary eye out for the rotating weapons she'd already encountered. She needed less than twenty seconds to be in range. Her shields still hadn't started recharging and she initiated her automated repair systems to check the generator. It was the only logical thing that could be broken but why didn't it show up on a damage report?

She got in range, firing her beam weapons. Both shots struck the enemy just below the engines. The target's shields reacted, brightening and immediately winking out. Anna took that opportunity, firing a missile and blasting away with her mass drivers. Chunks of metal popped off the hull of her opponent and it slowed down, giving the missile a chance to catch up.

The enemy turned into a ball of orange and purple. An ejection pod flew free of the fire. Anna took a deep breath and adjusted her course, heading back toward the fight. A large blip appeared on her scanner, something behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw an approaching Kalrawv destroyer, lumbering toward the action.

"I think we're about to get a lot more company," Anna announced. "I've got a destroyer on my six … plenty far away but it's closing fast."

"Catch back up to us," Preston said. "We've whittled the enemy down here but Jonny's going to have to return to the Gnosis."

"They knocked out my shields," Jonny added. "I've got engine damage and one of my beam weapons won't respond."

Anna shook her head. "Get out of there. Go back to the ship right now. We'll hold the rest. On that topic though, I've got my automated repair looking at the shield generator and it's not coming back with any news. Have the rest of you tried it?"

"I did," Preston replied. "Mine hasn't found the problem yet either."

Bella said, "Pretty sure we're dealing with a relay. Maybe not even fried … just … offline."

"I'll be back with you guys in …" Anna checked her distance. "One minute. How many enemies are still up?"

“One,” Preston replied.
“Zero,” Simon corrected. “Just got him.”
Anna checked the scanner again. The destroyer had yet to deploy additional fighters but it if did, they would need some reinforcements.
“Nice work, guys. I’m going to patch into the Gnosis and let them know we’ll need some help. Maybe Raptor can leave their surface patrol. They’re just skimming orbit anyway.”
“We need to figure out this shield thing,” Preston said. “I’m going to take this opportunity to dive into it. Maybe Jonny can figure something out back on the ship. Either way, without understanding that, we’re at a huge disadvantage.”
“Agreed.” An alarm went off in Anna’s cockpit and she checked scans again. She had five enemy ships coming in fast. Where the hell did they come from? “I’ve got incoming and they are really screaming! I’m not sure how they snuck up on me.”
“Call in Raptor,” Preston replied. “They might have a chance of getting to you in time.”
“I hope so.” Anna put in the call and engaged her afterburners to keep out of firing distance. They were closing fast but she had a head start. With any luck, she’d have some help long before they could start shooting.
That’s wishful thinking. A tinge of fear gripped her stomach, but she shoved it aside. There was no time to worry about the incoming attack. She needed to buy time and survive, two of the most difficult objectives she’d faced in a long time.

***

Dennis Arden’s Mustang squadron had the opportunity to fly with the Pahxin, backing them up in their operation against the capital ships. After spending time with Dala, he wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about the mission as he might’ve been. Their view involved victory at all costs where humans squeezed in a desire to survive.
Dala took the lead with nearly thirty Pahxin ships and six from the Gnosis. Once the scanners picked up incoming fighters, she ordered

them into action. They weren't quite to their targets when she clicked onto the open tactical net and offered up some observations concerning their opponents.

"My computer suggests these are experimental fighters," Dala said, "a Kalrawv test run. This holds the potential to be good for us in the sense that they may have bugs to work out. Unfortunately, we do not have a clear understanding of how they have armed these things so that will be a dangerous trial and error."

I'll say, Dennis thought. All the alien ships they faced were trial and error for the Gnosis crew. The Pahxin faced dozens of threats throughout their time in space so it became especially terrifying to think that the Pahxin didn't know exactly what to expect. Their experience didn't help, which made the fight all the more frightening.

"I recommend pass by tactics," some random Pahxin spoke over the com. "Draw their fire so we can see what we're up against. I volunteer."

For what? Dennis thought. "What's a pass by tactic?"

"Renka draws their fire," Dala replied, "and we see what happens."

"There has to be a better way than that," Dennis replied. "Surely, we can just … I don't know … rely on scans from the Stalwart?" He checked his own and noted that while his computer came up with a good reading on their shields and propulsion, there was no information at all on the weapons. "How is that possible?"

Dala explained, "They've elected to hide a specific aspect of their ship from scans. I've seen it before but from what I heard, it can be very expensive. Perhaps they've found a way around the cost … or maybe they don't care. Either way, the pass by request is approved. Ensure they know you are a threat or they might not take the bait."

Dennis wanted to protest but he bit his tongue. The Pahxin ship darted away from the formation, flying straight toward the incoming enemy forces. At current speed, the two forces would meet within minutes. One way or another, there would be a major engagement. They'd know what they were facing regardless if they practically sacrificed one of their own.

The Stalwart blasted one of the capital ships as their conflict erupted,

obliterating the craft in a matter of moments. Dennis winced when the destroyer exploded, surprised by the firepower leveraged against it. The Gnosis packed a punch, he'd seen them take down ships they probably had no business fighting but nothing went down that quickly for them.

Dennis's attention was brought back to the pass by fighter who charged his opponents and opened up, blasting away at the nearest enemies. They immediately broke formation, putting on a burst to chase him. Flashes popped from their weapons, brief green lights that winked in and out of existence instantly.

"Are those the weapons?" Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring asked. "Are they discharging rounds or beams?"

Dennis checked his scanner. The readings came back, indicating an energy weapon of some sort. "They aren't using projectiles. High concentration, short range beams."

Dala added, "They seem to lock target and specifically fire according to that range. The weakness I see is the need to lock on. They likely cannot blind fire those in an effort to hit. If they can, the range would be even more limited."

The pilot flying around out there maneuvered like a demon, avoiding his opponents with incredible grace and skill. It still horrified Dennis to think they were using him as bait, to get an idea of what they were up against. "Now that we know, permission to engage and help that pilot?"

"Granted," Dala said. "Hold on, Renka. We're coming to your aid."

"Hold fast," Renka replied. "I've been hit and have more data for you. When these blasts hit shields, they seem to affect the generator's ability to recharge. I'm at seventy-percent and it has not increased. Keep that in mind as you go into this brawl. They have a distinct advantage."

"They could nickel and dime us," Shane said. "Any way to reinforce the generator?"

"Not while in flight," Dennis said. "Okay, so … do what you would've done anyway and avoid being hit. Let's go." He jammed his throttle forward, kicking on the afterburners. The rest of Mustang kept pace

with him and the Pahxin around them did the same. They plunged toward their targets, each firing as they went.
Dennis maneuvered to avoid colliding with his target, dove under the next and banked hard to the right in a final effort to survive their flyby. He noted his shields miraculously remained fully charged. Spinning around, he maneuvered to engage his first target, noting they lost two Pahxin ships in that exchange.
Shane reported his shields were already down to fifty percent. The rest of Mustang made it through okay.
Time to see how good their defenses are. Dennis noted one of the enemies closing on an ally's tail. He swept over and acquired a solid firing solution, blasting away with his beam weapons. The enemy veered off but Dennis stayed on him, firing again. He clipped his shields, knocking them out.
The enemy's wings looked odd and as he leaned forward, he saw the weapons rotating. What, are you kidding me? He fired again just as the guns began to aim, this time tearing through the ship's engines. It tumbled forward, spinning wildly before exploding. Dennis veered to the side.
"They can redirect their weapons," Dennis announced. "Be cautious with that." He craned his neck to see if Renka made it, but he couldn't see him and his scanner didn't differentiate individual Pahxin ships. They had lost five in total, but the enemy was taking a beating. They were down twelve ships.
"Splash three for me," Alicia Quinn announced. Hot off her promotion, it didn't temper her wild flying techniques. She came up on Dennis's wing, forming up. "We've got three incoming on this position. I say we take them head on, weapons hot and see who flinches first. You with me?"
"No," Dennis replied. "Not with those weapons. Let's climb and come down on top of them. You take their three o'clock, I'll go for nine and we'll flank them."
"Not as much fun but you're the boss." Alicia veered off, performing a barrel roll as she moved into position. He found his own and they counted down before diving. The enemy seemed intent on attacking a

specific ship but as soon as the two Earth ships began firing at them, they tried to break off. “No you don’t.”
Alicia plunged below the ship and flipped around, a stunning and tight maneuver that had to have rattled her bones. She came at her target, blasting away at his underside. The shields went down just as she flew by and Dennis thought to support her but she spun in place, dropping a missile then jamming the afterburners forward when she finished the revolution.
As she flew off, her opponent exploded.
Dennis fired away at his own target, missing due to incredible evasion. He tried to anticipate the motions but couldn’t lead him. Finally, he launched a missile and fired to his target’s left. That did the trick and he scored a hit, but the shields absorbed it. The missile came close to connecting when the thrust suddenly stopped and it simply began to drift.
“It just did something to my missile!”
An alarm went off and the cockpit lit up, flashing with warnings across the scanning screen. He took several blasts to his tail before he spun to the left and dove. Shields showed at forty-percent. The enemy who caught up to him flew off, leaving him alone for a moment. No other damage presented itself, but it happened insanely fast.
Those guns they have are incredible!
“I’m getting a message from the Stalwart,” Dala said. “There are bombers incoming. Mustang One and Five, you’re with me. We should be able to handle them. The rest of you mop up this rabble. I want space superiority by the time I get back.”
She requested Dennis and Alicia to join her, which didn’t surprise Dennis at all. Dala expressed how impressed she was with both of them on several occasions. Considering they were about to go up against some vessels that should’ve been in better armor, it would be a challenge to take them down with only three fighters.
“You sure we don’t need more help?” Dennis asked.
“I could do it alone,” Alicia replied. “If you guys want to hang back here.”
“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” Dala said, “but we do this together.

Don’t worry. I’ll get you back to gaining glory for your people quickly enough. For now, form on me and prepare to take these out. I don’t want them taking any shots at the Stalwart while they’re busy.”
Dennis fell in and matched her speed. Their targets were two minutes out. Plenty of time to catch his breath and discover exactly what was wrong with his generator. If he could discover the problem, he could eliminate the enemy’s advantage completely, but chances were good he had to survive the rest of the battle on compromised shields.
Never a dull moment serving on the Gnosis. Dennis dialed in his computer and started the internal diagnostic.

***

Gizan watched his scan, waiting for it to locate any trace of the Trindisha hiding somewhere on the planet. He refused to believe Kalrawv had no idea what they were sitting on. While the resources on the world were extensive and certainly worth exploiting, they seemed like a fantastic cover for a much larger prize.
He focused his search on their mining operations first. Overhead, a battle began between the Kalrawv security forces and the military. Multiple ships came down to the surface, shuttles carrying soldiers intent on taking the base he assumed. When Gizan sent his own signal to the Tol’An, he made sure they sent ground troops as well.
Battle might’ve been inevitable depending on how well the security forces did their jobs. Their weapons certainly were terrifying enough to do some serious damage. Even in that ridiculous power armor, those human soldiers would not survive a tangle with sonic weaponry. After Gizan saw what it did to Dak, he knew how frightening Kalrawv tech had become.
However, he didn’t feel entirely confident in them. The humans swept through his own forces and took his hostages right out from under him. That took more than just daring and nerve. They had skill and if the Kalrawv underestimated them, they would likely fail and probably lose the base in short order.
The door opened and two officers charged in. They nearly tripped

over the bodies and Gizan directed his weapon at them, firing twice. Each of them screamed half a second before the blasts connected with their torsos, disrupting their internal organs and sending them to the ground, convulsing as they died.

He checked the scanner, feeling impatient with the time it was taking. People were coming to the control room to direct the battle, to try sending messages for help and to organize their people. More would arrive soon, and he wouldn't be able to kill them all. Not if they showed up en masse with soldiers.

None of their stored searches indicated they knew how to hunt for Trindisha energy. If they did have any clue, they were hiding it behind routine checks for different types of ore and atmospheric anomalies.

Footsteps in the hallway dragged his attention away from the screen. He counted at least four incoming.

Gizan moved to the side of the door, pressing himself against the wall. Three men burst in with weapons, again nearly tripping on the bodies directly in front of them. The distraction provided an opportunity. Gizan shot the first one in the back of the head. The victim didn't even scream. A sickening crunch sounded as the body collapsed to the ground. He redirected the weapon, pulling the trigger again but it merely clicked. His eyes widened. The other two men turned on him and he threw himself forward, ramming into them before they could shoot.

They tumbled to the floor, flailing their arms and hammer Gizan as he came down on top of him. He attempted to block some of the blows, but they scored several shots to the face and chest.

Retaliating, he took a blow to the nose in exchange to jam his thumb into his victim's throat. The man's mouth opened wide and he began gasping, grasping at his neck. The other grabbed Gizan by the arm and tried to drag him to the ground. They began to wrestle, vying for control of the conflict.

Gizan came out on the bottom. He wrapped his knees around the man's sides and squeezed, fending off his assailant's hands from getting a grip on his throat. They strained, each grunting through the conflict before the pressure against the man's soft bits became too

much.
His struggle lessened and he cried out. Gizan twisted one of his wrists, snapping it in a quick gesture. The man stumbled away and Gizan grabbed the other man's firearm. Rolling onto his back he shot the man three times in the torso, sending him cascading backward, obliterating his bones and internal organs.
Gizan rose, checking the scanner screen. A possibility presented itself, a hint of a specific type of power in one of the deeper mine shafts. He needed to get moving if he wanted to be there in a reasonable amount of time. The trip would take a minimum of twenty minutes and that was if he didn't have to fight anyone else.
Of course, the uniform might get him pretty far and Kalrawv had the marines to worry about. He wiped his search and headed out, rushing through the opposite door as more soldiers arrived. The woman might recover, she may even reveal his description to security, but it wouldn't matter.
By the time they knew he was running around their facility, it would be too late to stop him. His companions would arrive and he'd have the Trindisha. Kalrawv already lost the fight. They were simply going through the death throes before realizing it.

***

Heat figured the Kalrawv security forces would dig in near the central hub. That would be the largest fight in their effort to find the Orb. Afterward, he doubted they would be able to mount a real solid defense again, especially not after losing so many. He based his assessment on the idea of victory for his side.
"We're on your six!" Gillet shouted. "I have visual now!"
"Good," Heat grumbled. "It's about time. Prepare to move out."
"Heat?" Cassie's voice crackled over their com. "Do you read me?"
"I do," Heat replied. "What's up? I don't have much time to talk. We're about to storm the central building."
"I'm here," Cassie said. "I'm just inside near a wall that got blown to hell. Where are you?"

Heat sighed. “You have got to be kidding. You came down here? Why? I thought we had a plan.”
“It wasn’t working,” Cassie explained. “The interference from the weather and God knows what else prevented me from scanning the planet. I couldn’t tell you where to find the Orb but now that I’m here, I’ll use their equipment to locate it.”
“How’d you even get here?”
“Nolan gave me a ride,” Cassie said. “His bomber made it but he’s having to conduct some repairs out there right now. We were struck by lightning just before touchdown. You wouldn’t believe how intense that was.”
“I …” Heat bit his tongue before replying. “Got it. You’re back where Gillet and his guys just were. Follow the hallway to catch up to us but you probably want to hang back. They’re using sonic weapons and to say they’re nasty is a dramatic understatement. People are obliterated by these things.”
“Ooph. Got it. I’ll be there soon.”
Heat turned to Gillet and shook his head. “She’ll hang back and we cleared that section so we advance now. Come on, guys.”
Heat led the way, approaching another sealed door. This one was not locked so the marines stacked up on either side for cover and prepared to breach. He spoke softly, counting them down before he’d open it up. Their HUDs would attempt to scan for weapons, but the central hub was the largest part of the structure.
If there were any civilians, they would be in there. What was worse, the Kalrawv security guys weren’t wearing uniforms easy to distinguish from regular attire. Tarnished black coats, tan cargo pants and various kinds of boots. Definitely not military style. As Heat expected, targeting would be a nightmare.
Heat opened the door and before any of them even moved, a couple of sonic blasts wheezed past them, splashing into the ceiling. Theory proven. Damn it. He and Gillet popped a couple of flash bang grenades, something to disorient the crew inside. So far, none of them wore protective gear so they should’ve been plenty effective.
The grenades cracked, drawing out a couple strangled cries. Heat and

Gillet led the way with the other marines spilling in after them. They found cover as Erskin opened up, blasting away with a fully automatic spray from his rifle. Heat couldn't imagine he'd already seen a target, but he didn't have time to confirm.

They entered a chamber with a fifteen-foot ceiling and kiosks on the left and right. Doors led to other long hallways stretching to different wings. Consoles and benches, plants and statues blocked line of sight through the area. Kalrawv forces hid amongst these bits of cover and as the violence erupted, many people ran for the doors.

"Contact!" Vine yelled. "Er … everywhere!"

"Check your targets," Heat said. "Make sure you know who you're shooting before you pull the trigger." He leaned out to the right of his cover, a massive computer panel that controlled some kind of vending machine. A Kalrawv man held a civilian tightly, using him as a human shield. He faced to the right, giving Heat a small window to get him.

Heat took aim, zeroing in on his target's head. The man fired a couple of times, seemingly blind to suppress whoever he thought he saw.

Heat pulled the trigger once, nailing his opponent right below the ear. The bullet exited out the other side, creating a rust colored mist before the body collapsed.

The civilian screamed and ran for the door in blind panic, exiting as he reached it.

That one shot seemed to ignite a wild fire fight. Sonic blasts filled the air. The overlapping wheezing of the weapons sounded like an entire fraternity attempting to force themselves to vomit. Rifle shots responded, each crack echoing off the walls. Heat's HUD showed at least fifteen opponents, though some of them still could've been civilians.

Heat's cover console was struck several times, but the metal seemed to defy damage from the attack. He crouched and moved to the opposite site, glancing out to see a couple of men using a flipped over kiosk as cover. They had to bend low in order to be obscured and neither of them bothered to hide themselves.

The metal around them sparked with missed bullets, slapping the ground and bouncing harmlessly away. Heat took aim and prepared to

shoot again when a sonic blast slapped into his rifle, knocking it aside just as he pulled the trigger. His shots went wide and his weapon vibrated against his cover, nearly shaking it out of his hand.
Heat's HUD showed severe damage to the weapon, bad enough that it recommended he not fire it again. Letting it hang from the sling, he drew his pistol and looked for the guy who shot at him. Another blast nearly took his face off so he withdrew back to the safety of cover, cursing loudly.
"You get hit?" Gillet asked.
"My weapon did."
Private Taras let out a gurgling scream. Heat's HUD indicated his life signs had dropped. More cries filled the air, Kalrawv security forces being taken out. Heat risked another glance and this time saw his opponent, a guy hiding in a shop to the left. Just as Heat peeked out, the man fired at him again, this time going high.
Okay, bastard. Heat quickly fired his pistol, unleashing half the magazine at the shop. His target tried to fall back but at least one round caught his shoulder. Blood splattered the wall behind him and he remained hidden.
Two Kalrawv security personnel charged their position, shouting as they did. They got off a good four shots before they were annihilated by rifles from three different positions. As they dropped to the ground, Heat's target made a run for the door. Heat led him, taking only three shots before he got him in the head.
"How many are left?" Gillet called out. "Anyone got a good number?"
"Two," Cassie said. "I'm reading two armed people still alive but they're moving pretty slow. They might be injured."
"Be cautious," Heat said. "Bosh, take a look."
"Yes, sir." Bosh didn't sound thrilled but he stepped out into the area, moving slowly. "I hope you guys remember what providing cover means."
"Letting you get shot," Brock said. "Just find the last targets, man."
Heat shook his head, leaning out to take a look. He couldn't imagine they got them all. Some must've fled with the civilians, probably to find some reinforcements. The marines found themselves in a sort of

general gathering area. Stairs and elevators went up to different sections of the base.
Living quarters made up some of the hallways though there were also more important systems in them such as facilities, generators and basic environmental controls. Each of them would be fantastic places for people to hide but as far as Heat was concerned, they could stay there.
Providing they locked down whatever area Cassie needed to locate their prize, they'd be good to go.
"I found them," Bosh said. "They're done. Someone got these guys good."
"Disarm them then," Heat replied. "Establish a perimeter. I want this place locked down while we figure out where we're going next. Agent Alexander, can any of this stuff help you with what you need to do? There are definitely some computers in here. Mostly shops and a couple vending machines."
"Maybe." Cassie entered the room and stepped up to Heat. In his power armor, he towered over her by a good four feet. She scanned the area and gestured to a room near the opposite exit. "I'm going to try over there. Do you think it's safe?"
"I'll check it." Heat headed over there, peering inside. A woman held her hands up, closing her eyes tightly. She was unarmed, probably in her late fifties, and so terrified, she couldn't stop trembling. "Just a civilian here. Vine, I want this woman secured. Let's lock her up in the office over there with any others you find."
"I'm on it, Gunny." Vine came over and spoke through his external speaker. "Ma'am, we're not going to hurt you. Please come this way so we can secure you somewhere safe." He had to help her stand and led her away. She started crying halfway across the room, really sobbing the whole way.
Must've seen some of the bodies. Heat shook his head. This is messed up. "Come on, Cassie. It's ready."
"Thanks." Cassie hurried into the room, putting her tablet on the table. She tapped away, staring at the screen beside it. "Yes, this is patched into the central network. It probably doesn't have the

permissions to get through to what we need to complete the mission, but I can establish a better connection to the ship from here."
"Yeah?" Heat nodded. "That's better than nothing."
"If I do that, it might mean we can use our own scanners … but I'm not getting my hopes up. I still feel like we're going to have to take their control room."
"It's never easy," Heat muttered.
"Gnosis, this is Agent Alexander." Cassie tapped on her tablet for a few moments. "Do you read? Please respond."
Fielding's voice piped through Heat's helmet. "Can you hear me, Gunny? Agent Alexander? Hello?"
"I hear you," Heat said. "We've got a boost!"
"Great!" Fielding sounded relieved. "Give me a sitrep. What's going on down there? Have you located the Orb?"
"We're progressing," Heat replied, "but we're not there yet. I'll give you the quick version … We've still got a lot of ground to cover."

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Chapter 7

Ulian received a report stating the Gnosis was about to engage a destroyer. He clenched his fist. How did the Kalrawv Group manage to hide an entire capital ship from their sensor sweep? It has to be the interference in this system. The weather or maybe they've come up with some technical way to do it.

Regardless, the interruption to the operation annoyed him.

Ulian turned to Morala. "The Gnosis is under attack by a destroyer."

"What?" Morala immediately turned to her screen, staring at the scan. "How did those bastards … And we have our own problems." The ship shook from a massive barrage as their opponents opened up on them. Erda initiated more evasive maneuvers, jostling them in their seats.

"Viran, contact the Gnosis and see if they require aid."

"I'm afraid we're in no position to provide it," Ulian said. "Unless they maneuver toward us that is. Then perhaps …" He hummed. "We have the remaining destroyers, the bombers and that battleship that's remaining out of range, waiting to have us whittled down before engaging."

"They'll run," Morala replied. "I can almost guarantee it. They have no desire to push us and they want to play the victim. They can't do that if they are dead."

Ulian tilted his head. "Look at the tactics. Exhaust our fighters, challenge them with bombers, hit us with the destroyers … They're not running right now and they could while we're busy. No, they believe they can win this fight or they wouldn't be sticking around. However, they're playing a dangerous game. Even if we lose, they will be vulnerable."

Viran spoke up, "Commander, the Gnosis states they have their situation under control. I am also picking up a spatial anomaly consistent with hyperspace. It appears Kalrawv may have been able to call for reinforcements after all."

"Impossible!" Morala shook her head. "We jammed them the moment we arrived."

“I agree.” Ulian spoke more cautiously about it. “I have a bad feeling this is a third party.”
“The Tol’An?” Morala asked.
Ulian shrugged. “There aren’t many others who would want in on this action. It’s disturbing though. How would they have known to come here at all? Unless they discovered how to get the information out of their Orbs.” He stared at the floor in thought until the tremble of the ship brought him back to the moment. “Doesn’t matter now how they know.”
“Quite right.” Morala turned to Erda. “Have you targeted the next destroyer?”
“Yes, ma’am. I’m doing a dance over here.” Erda paused. “A second volley is on the way. They survived my first pass with some good evasive maneuvers. I don’t think they’ll make it this time.”
The weapons discharged, blasting through the enemy shields and obliterating the hull. In the same moment, the other five destroyers unleashed another attack. Erda hit his panel hard and the ship lurched downward, crushing everyone into their seats with the sudden motion. Ulian winced and remained tensed in anticipation of a blow that never came.
“Full evasion!” Erda clapped his hands once before tapping his screen with swift fingers. “Those bombers are still closing. How’re the fighters doing with closing in on them?”
Morala got on the com personally and sent a message, informing the pilots they needed to make haste. Ulian watched the screen, noting the telltale bright flashes of ships arriving from hyperspace. There were ten of them, each without any identifying marks but he already recognized their silhouettes.
They were certainly Tol’An and half of them rushed the planet.
“We need to send reinforcements to the ground units,” Ulian said. “I’ll organize it.” He got on the com and sent a message to have soldiers assemble for immediate departure. They would have a rough trip considering how many fighters were already roaming around and the addition of Tol’An hostiles complicated it further.
“This is getting ridiculous,” Morala muttered. “We should’ve brought a

fleet."
"This was supposed to be subtle," Ulian said. "A surgical strike at a faraway place. We've still got this. Remain focused. Kalrawv is about to be hit from both sides. If we're lucky, Tol'An will deal with the battleship. After that … well … you know how the terrorist commanders are. Zealous … but terrible."
"I guess it is the lesser of two evils," Morala replied. "Hit them again, Erda. Don't let up. Viran, let the Gnosis know we're sending their marines some help and if they haven't already seen it, tell them about our guests. It appears likely they'll have to face them on the ground. We can't intercept those vessels driving straight for the planet."
Ulian leaned back in his chair, considering the situation. The extra forces made the situation more dangerous but at the same time, it worked to their advantage in space. Distracting Kalrawv meant they had a better chance of avoiding those projectiles that could practically ignore shields.
He never thought he'd consider the Tol'An to be worth much but at least this time, they proved to have some minor value.

***

Alicia Quinn absolutely loved flying and found her role as a combat pilot to be the pinnacle of testing her skills. The promotion she received didn't mean nearly as much as the continued right to sit behind the controls of a fighter, pushing herself toward her absolute limits.
The Kalrawv Group weapons made the current conflict all the more exhilarating. Avoiding them practically required prescience but she'd only been clipped so far. Their pilots couldn't keep up with her style of rapid, wild maneuvers. Spinning, rolling and sudden banks meant they had a hard time getting a lock on her.
By all rights, she should've stayed with the rest of the force and continued the brawl.
Attacking the bombers wouldn't be particularly hard. They likely employed turrets for defense and would continue their courses

regardless of what was thrown at them. Their armor alone meant they should be able to take a few hits, even from missiles but there were only four of them.
The Gnosis would've sent an entire squadron against them, six ships to take them down. Dala seemed to think three would do the trick. Alicia didn't necessarily disagree, but would they be able to take them out before the bombers deployed ordnance against the Stalwart? That was another story.
"We're nearly in range," Dala said. "Prepare yourselves."
Dennis grunted. "My scans aren't showing their weapons either."
"Same trick as the fighters," Dala replied. "Though the silhouette suggests blasters akin to what we've seen from their destroyers. They'll pack a mean punch that might go straight through shields. You'll want to avoid them at all costs. Also, I'm reading the weak points are not the engines like normal. It's the nose and the top."
"Convenient," Alicia said. "They have emitters between the two thrusters in the back. That's to keep their engines safe from a rear assault. Okay, so we go from the top. That's cool with me. Permission to break formation and attack?"
Dala clicked her tongue before answering. "Hold tight. I think they have range on us."
Green blasts erupted from the turrets, hurtling toward them rapidly. They missed without requiring evasive maneuvers but all four of them turned the attacks on them, sending out a screen of energy blasts. Dala led them in a climb, effectively testing the rotation of the cannons and whether they could follow them in three hundred and sixty degrees. They screamed over the bombers, moving at near to top speed. The blasts continued to follow them until they were long past their targets.
"This'll be interesting." Dala chuckled. "I hope you're ready for some real fancy flying. When you attack, you'll want to maneuver like you never have before. Hit them with everything you've got on your way by. We'll concentrate efforts on the second to the middle. I've marked it on the scanner. If he goes up, he may cause damage to the others."
"Great idea," Dennis said. "But this might be suicide, you realize that, right?"

“We have to stop them from reaching the Stalwart,” Dala replied. “I’m not sure what else we have to concern ourselves with.”

Alicia figured Dennis was fuming in his cockpit with that answer. He put a lot of stock in risk management, in flying defensively. She personally felt there was a middle ground between his style of flying and Dala’s guts and glory approach. Fly hard and survive. Yes, the line might’ve been fine, but Alicia had been doing it since their first engagement.

And I’m still fine. Whoa! Alicia flipped and climbed, narrowly avoiding a curtain of blaster fire. She jammed the throttle forward, careening under the bombers while risking the second set of turrets. They opened up, chasing her as she went. As she cleared them, she climbed again, spinning in place.

The maneuver rattled her bones, tossing her about but she managed to maintain her composure, letting her beam weapons fly as well as two missiles. It wasn’t exactly the plan Dala had but at least one of the bombers would take some punishment.

Thrusters helped her slow the circle and she rocketed off away from additional attacks.

Scans indicated she’d scored several direct hits on one of the targets, tearing through their shields on the left side. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the one Dala and Dennis initiated a coordinated attack on. They strafed the one on the middle right, battering the roof as several turrets chased them on their way by.

Alicia looped around to follow up, dropping another missile at the one she hit a moment ago while planning her own attack run on their communal target. The turrets were facing the wrong way to catch her, and she made a pass without having to dodge at all. This afforded her the luxury of aiming, tearing through the top of the ship before banking away from them.

“The turrets are confused,” Dala called out. “They’re relying on automation to defend them. Break formation. We’ll hit them from multiple angles and continue to provide an ever-changing threat identifier for their AI. Go.”

Alicia timed it, letting Dennis take the first run. She kept out of the

range of the turrets, counting silently in her head for the chance to make the next attack. Dennis swept in from the rear, blasting away, cutting through the shields. The turrets swung around, the first two shots catching him as he veered off.

His shields didn't even flare up. The back stabilizer came loose, tumbling away. Alicia didn't have time to ask if he was okay. She initiated her own attack run, coming in from the enemy's starboard side. Blasting away with mass drivers. Holes appeared in the hull of her target, tearing straight through and bursting out the other side. Fire erupted from the holes, globes of orange and purple. Dala followed up, laying into it right behind Alicia. The turrets spun around twice, twitching but no longer shooting. This didn't stop their buddies on the left and right and Alicia narrowly avoided three shots that seemed to skim the bottom of her hull.

No damage registered but she knew she'd come out lucky.

The bomber exploded suddenly, cascading pieces in all directions. They blasted the bombers closest to them, forcing them to veer away and break formation. Alicia's first target darted off back toward his allies while the other two took a loop in an effort to get on course. Dala flew past Alicia, nearly clipping her she was so close. Alicia spun around and followed, dropping down low enough for a good line of sight on their combined target. They raced toward the one she initially damaged and lit him up, beam weapons nipping at his tail, shredding his shields.

He tried to evade, moving erratically to the left and right but he couldn't outmaneuver the smaller ships. Alicia fired her mass drivers, biting into the enemy's thrusters. Balls of fire exploded from the damage and Dala veered hard to the right. Alicia went the opposite direction just as the second bomber went up.

"I'm on the last two," Dennis shouted. "They're really pushing for the Stalwart!"

Alicia and Dala were a good twenty seconds away. They flew neck and neck to catch up as Dennis made a pass, dropping multiple missiles and beam weapons in the pass. The stabilizer he lost must not have given him too much trouble but as he passed them by, he took another

set of shots to his underside.
“Mayday!” Dennis called. “I just lost weapons … Controls are sluggish … I think my left thrusters are out.”
One of the bombers broke formation to follow Dennis, thrusters pumping out additional fuel to catch up. Alicia narrowed her eyes and focused, firing her weapons even though she was quite a ways off. The attack missed. “Punch out!” She called. “Do it! That guy’s all over your ass!”
“I’m working on it! I can’t …” Dennis’s com went dead as the shuttle struck him again, knocking his engines out. The pod burst free half a second before the rest of the ship went up and winked out of existence.
“God damn it!” Alicia wrenched her throttle back and slowed down, using her side thrusters to compel her to the left. She caressed the controls, moving in a circle around the bomber to bombard it continually with energy beams.
Turrets swung in her direction, but they couldn’t quite lead her. She made a full revolution before dropping two missiles and darting off. The ordnance hammered her target, knocking it to the side. Lights on the hull flickered and winked out and it began to drift. No one ejected but the ship seemed to go dead.
“One left,” Alicia muttered.
“I’ve got it,” Dala replied. She cruised up to the side of the bomber and let her weapons fly, slicing through the hull. After being caught up in the destruction of its ally, its defenses were gone.
It turned to run, flying back toward the Kalrawv ships but Dala looped around and blasted him again, blowing it away.
“That’s that.” Dala formed up with Alicia. “We’ll get search and rescue for Arden. Now, I’m getting a message that the Tol’An have shown up.”
“Great,” Alicia replied in a clipped tone. “That’s lovely. I guess we should get back at it then, huh?”
“There are many more ships to take care of.” Dala sighed. “Dennis will be fine. Follow my lead and we’ll get back to the others. We’ve done good work so far. We’ll wrap it up with a victory shortly enough.”

Pretty high cost, Alicia thought. For both sides.

***

Desmond stood, watching the view screen as they closed in on the enemy destroyer. They'd be in the thick of it soon enough. Charger squadron already called in Raptor to help fend off the enemy fighters. If they could take out the destroyer quickly, they'd likely remove the last vestige of defense from the Kalrawv roster.

"Tol'An forces have arrived in the system." Salina's announcement made Desmond close his eyes. "They are rapidly approaching the planet … the Stalwart is deploying support to our troops on the surface."

"Do we have to worry about the capital ships?" Desmond asked.

"It's possible we might have two to contend with after they drop their people off," Salina said. "Scans indicate they're moving swiftly but won't be here for some time. Their ETA is five minutes."

"Support for the troops?" Vincent asked.

"Six and a half."

Desmond shook his head. "And those shuttles have to contend with enemy fighters too. This is getting to be a bigger mess than we anticipated." He turned to Salina. "Let Fielding know what's going on with the Tol'An. Vincent, tell the pilots we've got more company. Zach, are the weapons ready?"

"We're hot and ready to go," Zach said. "Give me the word and I'll lay into them as soon as they're in range."

"Fire at will," Desmond said. "I want you to go for first strike. We need to seize the initiative and really put it to them. God knows our people might have the Orb at any moment and will need an extraction. We can't be playing with this bastard while that happens. A lucky shot could end the whole reason we came out here."

"I'm targeting what should be weak points in their vessel, but we don't have this silhouette in the database from the Pahxin." Zach shrugged. "I'm just hoping what I consider logical turns out to be true."

“I trust you.” Desmond returned to his seat and looked over the various reports. The marines didn’t have much to say but Cassie had linked up with them. He showed that to Vincent who looked somewhat relieved. Nolan was temporarily stuck on the surface while he conducted some field repairs. This left Rhino down one unit.
We won’t need them all providing we can take down their shields for the bombs. Desmond considered their opponent for another moment. They still had a good thirty seconds before firing and it looked so painfully peaceful in space directly ahead of them. Off a ways, the Stalwart engaged in a brutal fight but just over the surface of the planet, it felt almost serene.
We’ll fix that in just a moment.
The Kalrawv commanders were not to be trifled with. They knew how to fight and how to take advantage of their technology. The next few minutes would be like battling a totally unknown entity. Desmond prepared himself mentally to adjust their tactics, but he couldn’t think ahead three moves without knowing the possibilities.
Even with the messages from the Stalwart, he could only guess what they were facing. This particular destroyer didn’t look like the ones fighting their allies. It was something else. That meant the concussion beams may or may not be a problem. Desmond erred on the side of assuming that’s what they were facing.
If not, it doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll be fretting over something I can’t change.
“Opening fire!” Zach called, tapping his console. The ship whined as the weapons discharged, sending their blasts out in a tight pattern. The destroyer didn’t even attempt to evade, didn’t move to dodge. The energy from their assault battered their shields like a wrecking ball.
“Minimal shield damage,” Salina called. “It appears they have a powerful generator emitting that field. It might be one of the only things they can do with that ship. Considering the power output, I wouldn’t be surprised if they could not retaliate in any meaningful way.”
“Don’t put it past them,” Vincent said. “For all we know, the ship is probably a flying generator with minimal crew. I’m having the

bombers get into position so they can strike on our command."
"Good." Desmond sat down and gripped his chair. "They're counterattacking."
"I'm evading!" Zach got them moving just as a single beam erupted from the enemy ship. It struck the Gnosis, remaining connected for a good five seconds before disappearing. "What the hell was that thing?"
"Some kind of pulse laser," Salina said. "It dropped our forward shields by thirty percent by blasting energy waves the entire time it was in connection. Once it looked on to us, I don't think we could've shaken it off. Perhaps if we go backward next time and force them to extend it? That might even cause them some trouble."
"Good idea." Desmond gestured to Zach. "Keep that in mind and get us firing again. Let me know when the bombers are in position. I want to harass this bastard so he doesn't get too many chances to pull that off. This needs to end quickly, we can't play games considering everything that's at stake."

***

Nolan scanned various parts of the ship, trying to find the section most damaged by the lightning strike. He tried to be methodical, keeping his motions slow to ensure he focused on every part of the vessel, but he had a hard time remaining calm. The storm raged outside again and winds battered the hull, making the bomber rock. This thing isn't exactly light. The thought made him wonder about the trains that conveyed miners to their work environment. How long did it take them to get used to the weather? Did they ever? Did the Kalrawv Group warn potential employees what they were getting into? Nolan doubted it.
He reached the end of the ship, turned and started up the cargo bay. The internal computer failed to locate the problem, insisting that all systems checked out normal, despite every instrument flickering wildly. A relay must've been trashed, causing a disconnect in the diagnostic system.
But his hand scanner failed to find the problem, even on the second

pass. I have to go outside. The thought filled him with dread. Wind howled outside and the rain clattered on the hull so hard, he wondered if it might be hail. Even with his helmet on, he didn't know how safe it would be. Especially if the lightning kicked up again.
Nolan returned to the cockpit and scanned the entire area again, desperation driving him to a triple check. Finally, an anomaly came back. His heart leapt and he felt a sense of relief … until it suggested one of the relays near the surface of the hull on the top could be the culprit.
Do I even have what I need to fix that? Nolan considered his resources. If it required a replacement, he would be out of luck but if he simply needed to bypass it, that might be enough. There were two problems. One involved the weather but there were hostile forces out there as well.
He doubted they'd be running around the surface, but he put them down near enough to the facility that anything was possible. Clicking on the com, he tried to raise Cassandra. An indicator on his tablet rotated with one word throbbing slowly: connecting. Take your time, he thought. I've got plenty … not at all.
"Hello?" Cassie answered. "Who is this?"
"Hey! This is Nolan. I needed to ask you if you guys cleared that wing you entered through. Are there any more hostiles in that section?"
"Not that I'm aware of," Cassie replied. "Why? What's going on?"
"I have to go out on the hull of the bomber and fix something. I'm already going to be dodging lightning, I didn't want to have to dodge gunfire too."
"You should be fine. They're focused on us I believe."
"I'm sorry for you … but that's good news for me." Nolan frowned.
"Sort of. Okay, thanks for the update. Nolan out."
He put his helmet on and secured his mask. Dropping the ramp half way made the roar of the storm all that much wilder. He looked out at the cascading water drifting over the landscape, slapping the ground hard enough to bring dirt up with each gust. Jesus Christ … Nolan moved to the edge and waited, hoping it would slow down.
As expected, it did calm but he had no idea how long it would be

before it went wild again. Stepping down the ramp, he was able to reach the roof and he pulled himself up on the slick surface, remaining low. He didn't have to search for the panel in question. It was scorched black and roughly half way along the ship.

He crawled to it, praying silently that the wind wouldn't sweep him off the ship. There was nothing really to hold on to where he was going, no safety per se. The rain made it difficult enough, but any heavy gale would easily sweep him away.

When he reached the panel, he popped it off and found the smoking relay. It would need to be replaced but he thought he might be able to bypass it, giving him a chance to return to orbit. All I have to do is leave the surface. Once I'm in space, I can struggle bus my way back to the Gnosis and get some repairs.

The screen on his tablet collected beads of water, making it difficult to read. Nolan found the schematic he needed and reached in to perform a manual adjustment. The switches were tiny, and he had to remove his gloves. This is probably a bad idea. He hoped there wasn't some residual power that could shock the hell out of him, but he had to take the chance.

Reaching into the hole, he found the first one easily enough and flipped it. The tablet showed that it worked. The second one, he had to root around for. Just when he thought he'd found it, a sound to his left caught his attention. Ships, descending on the compound, streaked across the sky.

They were heading for the opposite side of the base from him but didn't look like any of the silhouettes he studied in the briefing. Those aren't Kalrawv or Pahxin. Nolan swallowed hard. Oh God. Could those be … Tol'An? But how? Why? Do we still have a traitor feeding them intelligence?

Nolan returned his attention to the switch. He needed to hurry so he could warn Cassie and the marines. Hovering over the panel, he used his body to keep as much water out of the panel as possible, but it wasn't working. After a few moments, his fingers were submerged and he still hadn't found the switch.

A heavy wind slapped him from behind, causing his stomach to do a

flip. Fortunately, it was just a gentle nudge but it was a promise of what could happen. Another set of ships descended on the planet. Nolan remained focused, muttering curses under his breath until he gasped.

Deep in the back right, he found the switch. He pinched it between his index finger and middle finger, jamming it to the side. It made an audible click loud enough to be heard over the weather and through his helmet. For half a second, he thought he might've broken it off but checking the tablet, he found that it was engaged.

Thank God! Nolan jammed the panel into place and pressed it down until it clicked. Shields might hold it in place long enough to get back to the Gnosis but without them, it would probably be gone the moment he took off. Crawling back swiftly, he slipped several times. Just as he reached aft, he saw a massive cloud of water rushing toward him. Throwing his arms around the left tail wing and braced his feet against the other. The wind slammed the ship so hard, it tilted up before crashing down on the landing gear. The blow nearly dislodged him and he clung tightly, eyes closed.

He had no idea how long it lasted but when it finally subsided, he guessed it had only been a few moments, twenty seconds tops. His tablet was gone, swept away by the storm. I don't need it anymore anyway. Nolan moved to the edge and hung down, swinging his feet until he found the ramp.

Dropping back into the ship, he took a moment to let his heart slow down as he gasped through the anxiety of what he'd just done. I survived. That's good enough for me. Nolan returned to the cockpit and restored power to the instrument panel. The flickering stopped but it was clear some of them were slow in gathering data.

That would be worse if I was trying to land down here. Nolan powered up the engines and closed the ramp. Strapping in, he sent a message to Cassie about the Tol'An vessels he saw. They might've already known but if not, the heads-up would definitely help. The second set of ships, he hadn't seen so it could be worse than he knew. Either way, there was nothing Nolan could do on the ground. He lifted off and jammed the throttle forward, hurling himself back toward

orbit. Good luck, guys. I don't envy you down here.

***

Anna sent the call to Raptor for help and they committed to getting to her as fast as they could. She would be with her own squadron shortly but the enemies chasing her were gaining. Even at full speed with afterburners, she still could only barely keep out in front of them.
"We're on our way to you," Preston said. "My computer suggests we'll meet up a good fifteen seconds before they can start shooting."
"I love it when we cut things close."
Preston chuckled. "This isn't really that close. I mean, we could slow down and get there with five seconds to spare if you'd rather."
"Knock it off." Anna checked her scanner and noted that Raptor would be there in one minute. They would be evenly matched after having to send one of theirs back for repairs. Unfortunately, the enemy weapons proved to be particularly nasty and her compute had yet to come up with a solution to charge the shields.
She had hoped Jonny would contact them back by then with some information. When she could let up on the throttle and breathe in anything other than short gasps, she'd reach out to the Gnosis for an update. Until then, all she could do was concentrate on forward motion, on keeping away from her attackers.
The scanner made them seem terribly close. She was reminded of something she saw in her childhood, a mirror in her grandfather's old car. It had a sticker that said objects in mirror are closer than they appear. They had always looked crazy close to her.
Her computer played the role this time. The enemy would be firing if they were as close as she felt in her gut. Even with the blips appearing on her screen, she had to ignore them and trust that Preston's estimate was right. They'd arrive in a moment, throwing themselves into another dogfight.
Ahead of her, she saw light from the thrusters of her unit. When they came into visual range, her confidence increased. The closest enemy ship to her seemed to be in the middle of their formation. It might've

even been their squadron leader. Anna decided that was her target, the one she'd focus on when she spun around.

"Looks like we're about twelve seconds apart," Anna said. "I'm going to flip around and engage."

"Is that a good idea?" Preston asked. "Ten seconds can be an eternity in combat."

"Yeah, I think it'll be fine." Anna killed the afterburners and jammed the flight stick to the left. Maneuvering thrusters compelled her around, even as she continued in the direction of her unit. As she came around, she opened up, firing her weapons blindly at the enemy. They didn't flinch as she had hoped, and maintained their formation. Okay, if that didn't move you … Anna engaged her rear thrusters and charged toward them. I will get your attention. She let her computer attempt to grab a lock on her target but started firing before it could get a tone. The enemy fighters finally broke their formation, all but the one in the front who seemed intent on playing chicken.

This happens far more often than I'd like. Anna fired again but decided against testing the resolve of her opponent. Knowing her luck, the bastard wanted to ram her. Veering hard to the left, she engaged her top thrusters, allowing her to maneuver and take a shot at her target's flank while flying by him.

The pressure from the maneuver was only partially absorbed by her inertial dampeners. Anna's head ached as the weapons engaged, slapping the shields of her targets and splashing against them. He spun around, entering the dogfight with her in a graceful turn. Anna righted herself, and moved in a straight path, parallel to his. Neither of them had a firing solution but as they started turning and spinning, it became apparent they were in for some work. All around them, weapons blasted through the darkness of space. Radio chatter indicated the constant rush of combat.

Anna focused on her task, letting herself fall into a zone of pure instinct. It might take some luck to survive the encounter, but she decided to rely on skill and training first. At least for so long as it took Raptor to join the party. Hurry up, guys. We need to wrap this up.

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Chapter 8

Heat received an upload from Cassie of a basic floor plan for the facility. The kiosk they found contained a map used by the different vendors to get around to the places they were authorized for. While the off-limits areas were not called out by name, they were dark sections on the overall layout.

He examined it on his HUD, puzzling out that to get to the control room, they would need to go up. There was an elevator as well as a flight of stairs they could take. He led them to the stairway and frowned at the narrow corridor leading up. They could fit single file in the power armor but even that would be tight.

"I'll lead the way," Heat said. "Gillet, take up the rear with Agent Alexander directly in front of you. Come on." He proceeded inside, moving upward. He reached the landing and turned the corner. They needed to go up four floors to reach their destination. He doubted they would encounter opposition until they were closer.

"Guys," Cassie spoke over the com, trying to keep her voice down. "I just got a message from Nolan. We've got Tol'An incoming."

Heat was about to reply when Fielding came on the line. "I've got some bad news. Tol'An forces are on route to your position. Looks like they know about the prize and want to be involved. However, the good news is the Pahxin are sending some aid. But …"

"Yeah," Heat muttered. "I knew that was coming."

"Well … It's just the Tol'An will be there first. Still, it'll take them some time to establish a perimeter and get into the facility so you should be fine. What's your current status?"

"Heading up the stairs to get to the control room," Heat said. "We'll be there soon and will probably have another engagement. I'm guessing they've locked down the sensitive parts of the facility. I'd like to know how the Tol'An got here. Did we have another traitor tip them off? If so, I think it's time to do a loyalty test."

"The signal!" Cassie shouted. She winced when Heat glared over the rail at her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to … Anyway, when we first arrived,

there was a weird signal that Salina and I found. We couldn't isolate it before it turned off, but it definitely came from the facility. Maybe the traitor isn't ours. Maybe someone from Kalrawv is working for the Tol'An."

"That would make me feel better," Fielding said, "in a way."

"Sir?" Gillet chimed in. "Gunny? Maybe we can worry about all that when we're done taking the facility?"

"Quite right," Fielding replied. "I'll mark this down for command to look into. You guys stay safe and finish the mission. Keep me informed of your progress."

Heat achieved the final landing and the door immediately opened, sliding aside from proximity. If someone had been waiting on the other side, they would've been able to shoot him. There was no taking cover, no avoiding contact but fortunately, the Kalrawv security picked a different spot for their defense.

He took a quick scan of the hallway, noting it took a ninety-degree turn not twenty feet left and right. He stepped out and moved to the left first, pressing against the wall. "Stack on the other side," Heat muttered on the com. "Break up into two groups and we'll cover both directions. It seems to link up to the main hallway on the opposite side of the stairs."

There was no being sneaky. Every step in the power armor echoed from contact with the metal floor. For this reason, it didn't matter that they hurried. When they arrived at the next hallway, Heat and Gillet faced one another with the gap only a foot away between them. The telltale wheezing of the sonic blasters filled the air.

Yellow beams struck the wall, suppressive fire to keep them from advancing. "Grenades," Heat said, popping his. Gillet followed suit and they chucked them down the way, compelling the explosives with the assistance of the hydraulics.

Heat counted down in his head before the explosives went off, two quick flashes before going dark. The shooting didn't slow. We must not have gotten them far enough. He crouched and risked a quick glance, noting his targets were held up on the opposite side of a door at the end of the hallway.

“We’re going to have to go bigger,” Heat said. “Cassie, get back to the stairs. This … has the potential to go wrong.” There wasn’t enough room for more than two of them to initiate his plan.
“What’re we going to do?” Gillet asked.
“Rockets.”
“That’ll make an impression.”
“A big one hopefully.” Heat drew a deep breath. “You ready?”
“As I’ll ever be.”
“We have to lean just enough so they don’t hit the wall.” Heat prepared himself and inched around the corner, launching his rocket. The thrust carried it swiftly down the hall, followed closely by Gillet’s. Two yellow blasts came close enough to Heat’s shoulder that he swore he felt the heat from them. It was an illogical thought, an impossible notion but it made him dart back into his cover, heart racing. He knew what those weapons could do to a man, even in power armor. He didn’t want to experience it firsthand.
The resulting explosion of the rockets made the floor shake. Kalrawv security forces began screaming, some shouting incoherently. Heat psyched himself to risk another glance. A massive section of the wall beside the door had been broken open, revealing circuitry beneath. The other attack hit the ceiling, leaving wires hanging down.
At least one man died in the attack. Bits of his body were scattered across the floor. Others seemed to be withdrawing, shouting for their fellows to fallback. They still held the tactical advantage, but the resulting explosions must’ve been enough to break their morale. Perhaps they didn’t know how many times the marines could do it. And technically, they could shell them for a while but if they were hiding out in the control room, then there was a risk of destroying their equipment. That would make hunting for the Orb all the more difficult.
“I’m moving up,” Heat announced. “Get ready to follow. The room ahead looks large enough for us to spread out.”
“I should go.” Gillet didn’t speak up fast enough. Heat was already in the hallway with his rifle aimed in the event someone poked their head around the corner. He hustled, his heavy footsteps echoing

around him. As he reached the door, he noted that the security forces had abandoned the room.
A woman cowered in a corner nearby and he aimed at her. She lifted her hands, eyes closed as tears soaked her cheeks. “Please!” She shouted. “I’m … I’m unarmed!”
“Get down here,” Heat said. “Room’s secure. There’s an unarmed civilian scared out of her mind. She might be able to help.”
The other marines came spilling into the room, securing the area. There were two other doors and they stacked up, acting as guards. Cassie entered next, assessing the situation from the entrance before cautiously moving in. “Oh God …” She stepped over something, sneering. Heat had stepped on some body part when he entered.
He understood her reaction.
“I’ll get on the terminal,” Cassie said. “This place is a mess.”
The woman spoke, “The other … the man … that … that … thug.”
“What’re you talking about?” Cassie asked. “What other man?”
“He came in here … killed Dak … I thought he was going to kill me too but he … he didn’t. He knocked me out. Security forces … found me.” She choked on her sobs. Cassie approached her, crouching. “He used the terminal, they said.”
“Crap,” Heat grumbled. “Tol’An, right? That sounds like one of their operatives causing trouble, don’t you think?”
Cassie nodded. “Very likely.” She touched the woman on the shoulder, making her jump. “I’m not going to hurt you. What was Kalrawv doing on this planet?”
“Resource … acquisition.”
Cassie tilted her head. “I don’t think that’s the whole truth, is it? Look at the attention this place suddenly grabbed. How long have you all been here?”
“I don’t know … I mean, I’ve been here for a while and I think they surveyed the planet half a year ago. Something happened recently. They doubled the mining crews and really started to strip this place. It’s like … there was a crazy deadline or something.” She shrugged. “I genuinely don’t know why.”
“Sounds like they knew about it,” Heat said. “We don’t have time to

mess with her. Get on the terminal, Cassie. Get this show moving."
Cassie stood and nodded. She hesitated for a long moment, examining the woman before turning to the console. "Maybe I can find out what he searched for." She tapped the console and cursed. "He seems to have wiped his activities. Damn it!"
"I can help." The woman stood up, drawing a couple of aimed rifles in her direction. She winced and held up her hands. "No really! I'm happy to assist. I saw what he did to Dak … It was terrible. I swore I was next. I'll help you figure … whatever you want out. Please, just … let me try?"
Heat turned to Cassie who shrugged. "I can do it without her, but her help would make it quicker."
"My name's Jayla … and I know these systems better than anyone. He might've wiped the front end of his search but there's a backup. I can bring it up and save you a lot of time."
Heat grumbled, "Don't even think about revealing our location to your buddies, lady. I don't have any patience for foolishness."
"Believe me," Jayla said. "I have no desire to push anyone today. I just want to make it out of here alive."
Cassie stepped aside, watching as Jayla brought up a menu on the console. The woman frowned, drilling down until she found what she was looking for. "This is weird." She gestured. "He was looking for an energy reading that … well … I mean, I'm not exactly a scientist, but I've seen scans before."
"What's wrong with it?" Cassie looked. "Oh."
"What?" Heat prompted.
"It's the Orb's energy reading. He was scanning the planet for it and found it deep in one of the mine shafts. That's where you need to go to find it." Cassie tapped at the screen for a moment. "I've uploaded the location to your computers. All of you have the map now."
"You coming?" Heat asked.
"I think I should stay here and help from the control room."
Heat sighed. "You won't be safe … Damn it. I'll leave someone behind. Vine. You're back up for Agent Alexander."
"Suits me," Vine replied.

“I’ll lock the doors,” Cassie said. “The ones you didn’t destroy at least.”
“Good enough.” Heat gestured for the other marines to follow him. “We’re moving out. Seems like we’re about to be in a race.”
Jayla lifted a hand, “I think I can help find that man who infiltrated the facility. That might help.”
“There you go,” Cassie said. “Jayla and I have some things to do as well. Be careful, Heat. There’s probably a lot more enemies between you and that Orb.”
“Nah, I’m sure it’ll be a piece of cake.” Heat shook his head. “See you soon.”

***

Gizan arrived at the mine shaft in question, pausing when he noticed Kalrawv guards up ahead. He looked down on himself, noting the blood covering his clothes, hands and face. They hadn’t noticed him yet so he called out for them not to shoot. Rushing forward, he put his hands over his head, throwing furtive glances behind him.
“Hold there!” One of the guards shouted. “What’s going on?”
“I just barely survived!” Gizan cried. “I was in the control room when the invaders attacked. They slaughtered the others! It was an absolute massacre!”
“Is that what’s going on up there?” The second guard spoke up. “We haven’t heard anything over the com.”
These fools don’t even communicate! Gizan found it ridiculous. They must’ve been in total chaos. This might work to my advantage.
“They’re coming down this way,” Gizan replied, creeping ever closer to them. He only needed another couple feet to be in melee range. “They want something hidden in the shaft … some secret we didn’t know about! I’ve come down here to check it out … to see if we have something to negotiate with.”
“How so?” The guard on the left tilted his head. “Who are you anyway? What’re you even doing down here?”
“I’m Oswald,” Gizan said. He spoke the name as if he should’ve been

well known. The guards turned to each other. That's when he struck, slamming his fist into the left man's throat and grabbing the other. They struggled for a moment before Gizan brought his target to the ground and snapped his neck.

The other gasped and sputtered, unable to speak. He stumbled back into the wall, trying to lift his weapon. Gizan aimed his own pistol and fired into the man's stomach. Internal organs burst and the man spit blood before dropping to the ground with a gory splatter.

Gizan hurried past them deeper into the mine shaft. His personal com began to chime and he checked. It was a scrambled channel from his Tol'An allies. He established a connection. "Speak."

"This is Commander Dalant. We have established ourselves on the planet but are currently engaged with Kalrawv forces. They seem to be using sonic weaponry. What is your status?"

"I am near the Trindisha," Gizan replied. "Use your ships to bombard the base where your opponents are and get down here as quickly as you can. I'm sending you a beacon now. We must make haste if we want to escape with this prize. The humans and the Pahxin military are here and will send reinforcements."

"Yes, some of our ships are engaged with Kalrawv and the Pahxin now," Dalant said. "They will hold them back while we accomplish our goal. I need to cut this contact while we attack the base. We will rendezvous as quickly as possible. Good luck, sir."

Gizan wondered how many ships they brought. They had a large threat out there to contend with, potent military forces that were well trained and dangerous. Ezria understood the value of the mission, the criticality of success. Hopefully, he committed an appropriately sized force to make this happen.

The entrance to the mine shaft was set with a metal floor but natural walls and ceiling. Beyond where the guards were stationed, the floor went away and he walked on uneven stone ground. Darkness closed in on him, but lights pounded into the walls provided illumination every twenty to thirty feet.

Gizan followed the tunnel as it descended. A small army could've easily traversed the area. The Kalwrav Group must've brought heavy

equipment through, taking drills and the like into the deepest sections of the planet. Silence surrounded him, sucking up all the sound from his footsteps.

Where are all the miners? Gizan wondered if maybe he was wrong. Kalrawv might've simply been strip mining the world and getting out. But that didn't entirely make sense. There were plenty of places they could've exploited legally. Why bother out here? Was saving money that important?

Probably. Gizan rounded a corner and paused as the tunnel opened into a vast chamber. Digging machines were scattered about, treaded for travel over the difficult terrain. A prefabricated unit sat off to the left, probably for employee downtime. Lights lined the ceiling, wires laced between them while hanging down a good five feet.

Several Kalrawv agents occupied the opposite side of the room. They stood beside a wall, gesturing to it over and over again. Gizan checked his tablet, confirming that they were standing near the Trindisha.

They do know. And now, they're just trying to work out exactly what to do.

They had options. If Kalrawv surrendered to the Pahxin, they could give up the rights to the Trindisha and probably walk away with little more than a slap to the wrist. However, they would also lose out on all that power. Surely, their higher ups sent them there for it. Failure for those corporate mercenaries was quite simply not allowed.

Much like Ezria, people tended to be executed for less.

They could always surrender to me, Gizan mused. The Tol'An didn't hide their presence. Kalrawv knew they had come and so they had to scramble if they wanted to walk away with anything at all. I'm afraid I have nothing to offer them but a swift death. I doubt they're interested in accepting it.

The guards spread out and rushed toward the edges of the room. They shouted to one another that each tunnel they passed was clear while tossing down something, likely a sensor probe to keep an eye on it. They'd be upon him shortly and he knew he needed to play up his role quickly or he'd have to kill even more men.

"What're you doing here?" One of the soldiers approached. "This is a

restricted area!"
"Of course it is, you idiot," Gizan replied, pacing toward him. "I've come down here to ensure it stays that way. Do you have any idea what's going on up there? I'm assuming from the way you're moving so slowly, you don't. There are invaders in this facility and they're killing everyone! Civilians, security forces … It's bad."
"I don't recognize you." The soldier spoke tentatively, clearly unsure if he should be questioning the newcomer.
"Typical." Gizan shook his head. "I know why we're down here. If you don't let me pass, I won't be able to secure that prize for our higher ups. Do you want to fail? Be my guest, I'll be happy to throw your name out there when I'm asked who stopped me." He glared at him. "Who's in charge here anyway?"
"Narius." The soldier pointed back toward the man standing alone near the wall. "He's in command right now."
"I'll just go speak to him then." Gizan moved past the two soldiers, not bothering to look at them as he walked. Neither of them stopped him and instead locked down the passage he'd just come through. It made him smirk. That worked out better than I could've hoped. If I play this right, these fools will keep this safe until my people arrive. "Narius!" The man looked up with a confused expression on his face. "Um … who are you?"
"I'm in charge," Gizan said. "I know what's behind this wall and we're going to need to secure it. I've got the guards locking down the area up there so we should make haste. What's your plan to open this up?"
"Um …" Narius looked around, pursing his lips. "To be honest, I was about to contact the Pahxin ship and ask them to stand down in exchange for whatever's in here. Our forces are being devastated. We cannot stand against that battleship. They've already taken out three of our destroyers and now, I've heard the Tol'An have arrived as well!"
"I'm not going to give up that easily," Gizan said. "I refuse to let you do so either. I will contact the Pahxin for us and delay them while we get this thing out. Perhaps we can smuggle it away while we negotiate." He shook his head. "You must be clever to get ahead in

this organization, Narius. I'm disappointed in your lack of forethought."
"People are dying, sir," Narius replied. "How many lives is this thing worth? How many resources is the company willing to lose?"
"All of them," Gizan said. "Do you not realize this is a Trindisha? The government greedily held on to theirs until it was stolen. And they never even admitted there was a possibility of more. Now, we know there are and I'm planning on taking a promotion for turning this over to my superiors. You must make a choice."
"And what's that?" Narius asked.
"Whether you wish to rise with me," Gizan stepped closer, "or be held accountable for our failure."
Narius didn't have to consider the statement for long before he nodded emphatically. "Alright, I'm with you. What do we have to do?"
Gizan scanned the wall with his tablet and smirked. "Secure the device with some explosives. You gather them. Don't use the drills … you might damage it. I'll start delaying our adversaries now. Hurry. We may not have much time before their forces storm these mines and root us out but before then, I fully intend to have this on a ship leaving the system."
"I'm on it!" Narius rushed off and Gizan smiled, turning away. He engaged his communicator, reaching out to the Pahxin.
"Military vessel," he began, "this is the Kalrawv Group requesting parlay. Please respond."

***

Ulian gripped his seat as Erda took them through another round of evasive maneuvers. It didn't save them from all the shots this time, but with only four destroyers left, the damage done was minimal. The battleship remained the biggest threat but the Tol'An kept them busy on the opposite side of the battlefield.
Fighter wings reported some losses though not as heavy as initially expected. The biggest threat on the field likely came from the Kalrawv

bombers, but they had now been taken out. The destroyers managed to cause structural damage on multiple sides of the Stalwart but nothing too traumatic.

It seemed likely they would call the engagement a victory soon enough.

Providing the ground action goes according to plan … and the Tol'An don't pull anything unexpected.

"Erda," Morala said, "close on our targets. Initiate full thrust and fire as we go."

Ulian's eyes widened and he turned to her. "What's the tactic here?"

"I intend to finish off the destroyers and be in position to finish off the battleship," Morala replied. "While they're distracted with the Tol'An, I intend to wrap this entire engagement up so we can focus our attention on the new threat."

Ulian considered how to respond, wondering if he even needed to. It wasn't a tactic he would've chosen, but he saw the merit. And he did give her operational command for a reason. After a moment of reconciling his thoughts to the choice, he merely nodded and leaned back in his seat, prepared to see the results.

Erda engaged the engines, pushing them toward their objective at a rapid pace. Morala warned the fighters to move before they arrived, letting them know the Stalwart would be plowing right through their position. The Kalrawv vessels turned tail and tried to pull away, moving toward the Tol'An.

I suppose they've decided they don't have the firepower, Ulian thought. Maybe this was the right call after all.

Viran cleared her throat, "I have a Kalrawv representative from the planet on the line. They'd like to discuss terms for the surrender of …" She paused. "A Trindisha."

Morala cursed. "Put them on speaker, please."

"I'll take this," Ulian replied. "This is Ulian Hataran of the Stalwart. State what you want."

"My name is Gizan and I am contacting you because I realize why you are here. This is an unlawful attain to claim something we did not even know was present. However, we would like to live so we are

prepared to turn it over to you in return for leaving our remaining vessels alone."
"We can simply take it either way," Ulian said. "And I believe your battle commander suggested we were going to fight when we spoke before. They don't appear to be ready to stand down … but they might be on their way out. Besides, you have another problem besides us. Even if I accepted your deal, it would not be a simple trade of your lives for the device."
"Then perhaps you should do your duty as a government official," Gizan replied, "and protect us against those terrorists. I believe even now you have men on this world which are about to confront the Tol'An. Many of my people have been slain for no reason other than your greed to steal."
"You know the law." Ulian scowled as he spoke. "You did not acquire a license for this operation, you have several unregistered silhouettes, illegal weapons … and on top of it all, you expect me to believe you had no knowledge of the Trindisha. We may be many things in the military but stupid is not one of them. Tell me the truth."
"All I know is that you have the blood of innocent people on your hands!" Gizan shouted. "You have threatened and bullied us, and we are now making an honest offer but you're throwing … legalities and other nonsense in our faces! Well, that is not going to fly in a court of law, sir!"
"I feel you're stalling us," Ulian said. "But really, you shouldn't be. Right now, we are charging your final ships with the intention of finishing this battle once and for all. If you have a real offer, then make it. Otherwise, I'm going to close this line down and you can surrender to the ground forces when they converge on your position."
"You cannot do this!" Gizan cried. "For the sake of honor, you should stay your hand!"
"I believe you have a short period of time before our people arrive," Ulian answered. "I suggest you find a way to show them you surrender so they do not fire. The choice is yours. We will speak again when you are safely within a cell on your way back to the home world for a trial of your own. Hataran out."

Ulian cut the connection and turned to Morala. “Sorry about that. Please, continue the operation.”

“With pleasure, sir.” Morala turned to Erda. “Open fire.”

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Chapter 9

The lights flashed on the Gnosis bridge as the strange beam struck them again. Zach got them moving swiftly, the ship lurching backward away from the assault. They pulled away and the beam disappeared. Desmond guessed they saved themselves several seconds of continuous damage by moving.

“I was right,” Salina announced. “They have to calculate the range and there’s not a lot of margin for error there.”

“Excellent,” Desmond replied. “Damage report?”

“Minor hull scorching,” Salina said. “Casualty report is coming in. Those who were closest to that section are reporting radiation burns. Shields are down to thirty percent on the bow. I’m diverting power to charge them, but the emitters are having trouble. Webber’s sending a team now.”

Desmond peered at the screen, staring intently at their opponent. They’d blasted them several times, giving as good as they were getting. “Vincent, do you think we’re ready to send the bombers in?”

Vincent stared at his terminal’s screen for a long moment before letting out a sigh. “Probably. Even if their shields are over thirty percent, the concussion damage alone should be enough to finish them off. And if we have them launch everything?” He shrugged. “That would level an unshielded space station. It’ll at least give them something to think about.”

“Order them in.” Desmond pointed at Zach. “Keep hitting that ship. Salina, I want a report on how our fighters are doing, both right here and with the Stalwart. Get me some data, folks. Those people on the surface are going to want some support soon and if we’re not in a position to give it to them, we’ll be risking the mission.”

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Flight Lieutenant Micah Zane didn’t mind having to lead the bomber squadron, but he had hoped Nolan would have joined them already.

They waited on the edge of the battle, essentially watching as the destroyer and the Gnosis went toe to toe. The chaos of fighter combat exploded before them and they simply had to hold back.

Glory to the fighter jockeys. Micah couldn't put much conviction behind the snark. He didn't really want to be out there dogfighting with the enemy, especially when he heard the radio chatter. Listening to them talk about flashing blasts that knocked out shields did not sound like his idea of a good time.

Nor would it be particularly glorious to be blown away by one of those crazy bastards, even if that was a possibility when they were finally scrambled into action to do their part.

"Lieutenant Zane," Vincent Bowman's voice filled his cockpit. "I am authorizing you to attack. Attack the enemy vessel with everything you've got. Hit it with all ordnance. Copy?"

"Copy, Commander." Micah bit his lip. "That's an awful lot of firepower … We need to ensure everyone's well away from that blast. The shockwave alone could be devastating."

"Understood," Vincent replied. "I'm giving orders to the pilots now. You'll have some escorts, but they won't be able to meet you until you're half way there. Godspeed, Lieutenant. Bowman out."

Micah leaned back in his seat, sweat coating his back. He half expected they wouldn't be called into action, that the conflict would be over without their intervention. The thought of hitting the destroyer with everything made him anxious. It meant the Gnosis bridge crew may not be confident they could do enough damage on their own to take it out.

The concussion alone would be enough to put a hurt on the thing. If the planet wasn't already in a terrible way, the bombs might've pushed the atmospheric interference to a new level of dangerous.

None of that mattered just then. The order came. He and his people had a job to do.

"Rhino," Micah cleared his throat when the word didn't come out with the force he intended. "Rhino Squadron, we have been ordered to hit the enemy vessel with everything we've got. Each of us will fire our entire payload at the vessel and withdraw to safety. I'll take the lead,

form up on me."
"Sir," Lieutenant Mariah Pine spoke, "is that going to be safe? How are we going to get out of there ahead of the shockwave with so many bombs going off at once?"
"Won't be a problem," Officer Deanne Stewart answered. "Once we deploy, we spin around and hit the afterburners. We'll have a good ten seconds before the bombs go off and another thirty before they could possibly catch up. That's plenty of time to reach a minimal safe distance. I'd be more worried about the planet … and the fighters."
"Planet's already hosed," Micah said. He engaged his engines, flying directly for their target. "And the fighters will move. Besides, they're more nimble than we are. We've got this. Get your turrets on and your shields on full. This is going to be one hell of a trip and depending on how it goes, the return won't be much fun either."
"What about Nolan?" Mariah asked. "Can we expect him to join the party?"
"I haven't been able to reach him on the com," Micah replied. "And God knows that interference is messing with it." I hope he made it okay. That weather would've been enough to put anyone down hard.
"Regardless, we'll keep an eye out and let him in on the action. I don't think he'd want to miss this."
Yeah … fat chance.

***

Nolan raced toward orbit, just clearing the cloud coverage when his communicator started working. The chatter involved the nearby fighters and the bombers moving into position to deploy against the destroyer. Well, at least they got to do something, I suppose. He checked his gauges and everything seemed to be functioning still. Small favors.
"Nolan?" Vincent's voice crackled in his ears. "Can you hear me? Are you there?"
"Commander," Nolan replied. "I had some challenges on the surface and I'll need to make a landing. Lightning took out a relay."

“Are you combat effective?”
Nolan hesitated to answer. His shields were functional. He kept them on to hold the panel in place. Weapons were also online. “I would cautiously say yes but I was literally coming in for repairs.”
“I’m afraid I need you to redirect toward the surface,” Vincent said. “I need you to help with escort duty. There are some Pahxin fighters but they’re calling for backup … You’re the closest ship to them.”
“Escort.” Nolan’s brows lifted. “You have to be kidding, sir. Maneuverability down there is terrible for the best of ships and I’m flying a big ass boat. What happened to Raptor?”
“They’re backing up Charger right now.”
“God damn it.” Nolan sighed. “Yes, sir. I’ll head back there now.”
“Get down there, ensure the transports land and come home. Thank you.”
“Yeah, I get it.” Nolan flipped around and flew toward the planet, shaking his head. This is an absolutely terrible idea. He prepared himself for the winds again, hoping he would have a better time of it on his descent. As the ship started shaking and he had to fight the controls, he cursed under his breath. Yep, still a really bad idea! Shields held through the worst of the turbulence but far more important was that the panel remained in place. He wondered if it might be able to come loose despite the shields but even if it did, his bypass remained functional. Breaking through the clouds, the surface burst into view some distance below him, a sight he never wanted to see again.
“Okay …” Nolan clicked on the open com channel. “Pahxin fighter escort, this is Rhino One requesting a position. I’ve been ordered to provide an escort. Please respond.”
It took him three tries before someone finally responded.
“Human ship,” a woman’s stiff voice returned, “I am sending you a ping. We are under heavy attack by Kalrawv mercenaries. Any assistance would be much appreciated. We have two full loads of soldiers who need to get onto that facility.”
“Understood.” Nolan checked his scanner and noted he could be there in less than thirty seconds, weather permitting. “I’m fairly close. See

you in a moment. Please don't shoot at the lumbering bomber heading in your direction, okay?"

"You are on our friend or foe list already. Good luck."

Hope I don't need it. Nolan winced as another gust of wind nearly tossed him thirty feet off course. He corrected, working the throttle of his thrusters to fight the gale. Drawing the stick back, he climbed to buy himself some altitude, but the air wasn't any better up there. Weapon fire lit up the horizon and he saw the fight he was about to get into. The shuttles barreled down on the facility with all the tenacity and stubbornness of bulls. Nolan counted five in all and they were being harassed by nearly eight fighters. The four escorts struggled against the weather and their attackers, flying erratically in the conditions.

How much good am I going to do? Nolan thought. The Pahxin had to have sent more than four ships to protect their soldiers. How many did they lose before I was asked to help? Asking the question would've been in bad taste. He needed to ensure those soldiers made it to their destination, regardless of circumstance.

The blasts from the enemy ships came in quick flashes. They didn't fire without a decent solution. Evaluating it didn't help much but it passed the few seconds it would take for him to get there. He elected to go in below them, jamming the after burners to plow through the difficult air pockets and give him the best chance to cause some damage.

Nolan cranked on the automated attack program, feeding it the enemy pilots as targets. When he drew close enough, the guns kicked on, blasting away as he lumbered beneath them. Pahxin pilots darted all around him, little more than blurs from their speed. The enemy scattered, and the shuttles kept going.

"How much time do we have to buy?" Nolan asked, climbing as he finished his attack run. One of the enemy ships decided to follow him. His turret rewarded them with a constant stream of fire, forcing them into evasive maneuvers that drove them off after only a few moments.

"One minute to landing," a Pahxin voice came back. "We're almost there."

Christ, that's forever. Nolan banked and came around, speeding back toward the others. The wind caught one of his allies, tossing it into the facility. The ship exploded in an instant, leaving a giant hole in the ceiling of that particular wing. Holy shit! That guy didn't even have a chance to eject!

Nolan worried about crashing down there before there was gunfire. Something struck the back of his ship as the turret engaged once again. Minor shield damage didn't slow him down but the enemy kept at it, clipping away at his defenses. This opponent remained dedicated to takin him down, even to the point that they risked the blasts from his guns.

Six shots from the turret ripped through the enemy, cutting into the nose and cockpit. A massive fire exploded from the seams as the fighter went down, smacking the ground hard enough to send a plume of dust and smoke high into the air. Seven left … three escorts, me and a bunch of shuttles with crappy weapons. Lovely.

"One down." Nolan saw another flash nearby as one of the Kalrawv vessels exploded in a spectacular show of purple and green.

A wall of gray clouds roiled in the east, turning into a swirling vortex of a massive storm. Nolan estimated it to be no more than a hundred miles away and it moved swiftly. The wind and rain combined into a funnel, a tornado tearing up the soil and dancing in their direction. What would that do to the facility?

An alarm went off, pulling his attention to his right. He banked hard to avoid a collision with one of the enemies, and his turret blasted away as the ship flew past. Leveling out, he flew over the shuttles, fending off the attacking ships that darted all around them.

He noted another Pahxin loss, cutting the escorts down to two other flyers and his bomber. Kalrawv still had five flyers up there, plenty to destroy those shuttles and finish off the escorts. Nolan's turrets drove them off temporarily and when they returned, they seemed focused on him. It made sense. He represented the biggest threat.

His armor and shields were tough, and his weapons could get them from any angle. It made up for his relatively poor maneuverability. As one of his blasts clipped one of the enemies in the rear, cutting right

through their shields and causing massive damage, he knew they'd be directing all their efforts on him momentarily.
"I recommend you guys land ASAP and breach a wall," Nolan said. "When they finally dedicate everything to me, I won't last long. In fact … I'm going to lead them off to buy you a little breathing room. Escorts, remain with the shuttles and wish me luck."
He yanked the stick back and jammed the throttle forward, hurling himself upward. The Tornado to the east continued to meander in their direction. It was an opportunity. The funnel itself would be far too dangerous to fly into but his ship was big enough to survive the turbulence around it.
Banking to the east, he flew off toward the storm, aiming directly for it. It would take less than a minute to get there but he banked gradually to ensure he'd give it a wide berth. The Kalrawv pilots continued to chase him, knowing full well that if they returned to their original quarry, Nolan would come right back.
Perhaps they knew they failed to keep the Pahxin soldiers away from their base and merely wanted some revenge. The shuttle escorts didn't pursue them, but remained close to their charges, letting Nolan lead them off. Oddly enough, they weren't taking shots at him as they followed.
Is that a limitation of their flashy weapons? Nolan didn't have time to appreciate it before one of them caught him in the aft, cutting his shields down to thirty percent.
Scans offered some level of predictive analysis concerning how the storm would move but Nolan knew he couldn't rely on it. The funnel would go in whatever direction it felt like, indulging total chaos. Keeping the dark mass in his peripheral vision, Nolan banked gently away, kicking on the bottom thrusters to give him some additional distance.
One of the fighters tried to take advantage of his motion, swooping in to take a shot at his underside. The turbulence from the funnel proved too much for the smaller craft, grabbing it and spinning it directly into the funnel. It spun around, torn at unimaginable speeds, surely enough to kill the pilot.

The ejection pod burst free and the ship was crushed a moment later. Nolan pulled up, hitting the afterburners. The storm raged behind him now, but the winds made his ascent a shaky nightmare. More shots connected with his rear, cutting through his shields. Instruments went haywire as the panel he'd repaired earlier came free. The bypass dropped.

Good thing I'm going up, I guess. Nolan spun in place, hoping his turret would be enough to drive them off. They continued following him, dodging his attacks while chipping away at his defenses.

"Anyone out there," Nolan spoke over the com. "I could really use some help right about now. I'm just about to break atmosphere and I've got some seriously persistent pricks all over my ass. Please respond."

Interference filled the speakers with static. He'd received a message from the Gnosis when he reached that altitude. Come on, folks.

Turbulence settled down, but another shot from his pursuers made the ship shake violently. "Guys, seriously, I need a hand. Any fighter out here, respond!"

Despair grabbed Nolan as more alarms went off. He couldn't even check the damage due to his scanner being down. The turret fell silent, no longer blasting away at the targets behind him. They had no hindrance to end him now, nothing preventing them from continuing to hound him straight through to their final shot.

He eyeballed the ejection handle, but he wasn't high enough to avoid going right back down to the planet. Another few moments would make all the difference. It would mean he would at least be found by search and rescue rather than be killed by some rampaging storm on one of the God forsaken continents below him.

Weapons exploded in front of him as two fighters sped so fast it made his head spin.

"Relax," Lieutenant Dylan Ball replied to him. He was Raptor Two and had been assigned for air support on the planetary operation. "We've got your back, buddy. Just keep on with your current course and we'll take care of your pals. They're already breaking away. I guess they don't want to play with even odds."

“No, it didn’t seem like it,” Nolan muttered. “Thank you, guys. You have no idea how good it is to see you.”
“Sorry it took so long to get here. Your com must be messed up. We heard you, but you must not have heard us. We asked you to bank left.”
“Yeah, believe me, I’ve got a lot of problems on my end right now.” Nolan redirected toward the Gnosis, ready to dock. “See you guys back at the ship. Thanks again!” Violence broke behind him and he had no doubt he owed both pilots his life. As he broke atmosphere, he redirected to the Gnosis. He’d make it up to them on the trip back. That was a promise.

***

Micah winced as a blast struck his left side, causing his shields to flash so brightly it left tracers in his eyes. He blinked several times, trying to clear his vision but it only barely worked. They were close to their target but the Kalrawv pilots altered their course, laying into the bombers as soon as they were within range.
Even with Charger and Raptor swarming them, the enemy worked hard to keep the larger ships away. Turrets blared and pilots sacrificed their lives in an effort to hold the bombers off but they just couldn’t do enough damage to break through their defenses. Deanne took the worst of it, but even at twenty-percent shields, they still had her armor to contend with.
The targeting computer provided a countdown before they needed to deploy their weapons. Micah swore it was moving in slow motion but as it dropped below two thousand kilometers, he felt a sudden sense of urgency. The enemy ships began to frenzy about them, like riled up bees.
“Watch out,” Nolan said, “these maniacs might be crazy enough to ram someone. Be ready to maneuver. We’re firing in …” He checked the scanner. “Less than twenty seconds. Be prepared.”
One of the enemy ships nearly clipped his nose and he instinctually dove. The maneuver might’ve saved his life, he couldn’t be sure but it

also benefited the enemy, buying the destroyer another few moments. A little more effort on his opponent's part might've put him off for half a minute.

What good will that do for them? God only knows.

Did they have a plan? Something that would save them if they only had another minute? Micah doubted it and as he deployed his bombs, sending them hurtling through space toward their target, he figured they would never know what the enemy hoped to achieve with their last-ditch effort.

"Weapons clear!" Micah shouted, flipping around and hitting the afterburners. A new number appeared on his scanner, indicating how far he was away from the target. It was in the red, meaning he was too close. The goal was to get to green and they should've had plenty of time.

The others called out their deployments before racing to join him. The next two minutes would determine a great many things, not the least of which whether or not they blew the enemy destroyer … and if they'd survive the attempt. Somewhere along the way, the enemy fighters disengaged or were destroyed by allied ships.

At least they weren't harassing the bombers anymore.

"Gnosis, this is Rhino Two. We have deployed bombs and are fleeing the area." Micah paused as two Raptor pilots dashed by them, screaming toward the planet surface. Yeah, I wish we were that fast. He checked his scanner and caught sight of Nolan's ship, Rhino One, just on the verge of breaking atmosphere.

Micah worked his communicator. How did I not hear anything come through from him? "I … really … some help … now. Break atmosphere … seriously … pricks … ass. Respond!"

"Hey!" Micah called but his computer let him know his message didn't go through. He didn't have the luxury of messing with it just at that moment. Instead, he focused his attention on getting away from the destruction. Clearly the two Raptor pilots were on route to help Nolan out.

We have to just focus on ourselves right now.

***

“Bombs are away,” Vincent announced. “Impact in less than thirty seconds.”

Desmond merely nodded, staring at the screen. The enemy destroyer kept trying to close the distance between them, but Zach did a great job of staying out of range, ensuring they couldn’t hit them with their special weapon for long. On the flip side, the Gnosis pounded their ship with continuous barrages of firepower, but it wasn’t enough to finish them off.

Hopefully all those bombs will at least give them a damn head ache. He needed a better understanding of enemy defenses, or at least the engineers did. Their weapons required some tweaking to make these engagements even. Without tricks and maneuverability, the Gnosis would’ve been outmatched. If the bombers didn’t pull off a victory for them, they’d end up needing the Stalwart to step in.

Our weapons hit pretty hard when we get through their damn shields, but those barriers are incredible. Desmond turned to Salina. “Do we have a report from our fighters? How did we do?”

“I’m still waiting to hear back from everyone,” Salina said. “Mustang One was shot down … His pod ejected but the interference is making it impossible for me to get through to him. I have his beacon for search and rescue. Raptor Four is also down. Those are the ones I know for sure. Rhino One is on route back to the ship for repairs.”

“He’s probably pretty grumpy,” Vincent muttered. “I had to divert him to help support the Pahxin ground force arrival on the planet. They were having a rough time.”

“Understood.” Desmond tapped his com and brought up Fielding. “Report. How’re things on the planet? Have you heard from Agent Alexander?”

“Sir, our people know where the Orb is located and are on their way to secure it. Agent Alexander is in the control room, providing backup support. We’ve had some casualties …” Fielding paused. “They have a nasty set of weapons down there that we’re dealing with but otherwise, I don’t foresee any additional complications at this time.”

“Thank you.” Desmond frowned. “Let me know if anything else comes up and especially once we have the Orb in our possession.” He flipped off the com. “Anyone know how the Stalwart is doing? I’m shocked the Tol’An have left us alone and stayed on that side of the system.”
Vincent explained, “The Kalrawv ships are pinned between the Stalwart and the Tol’An but they seem to be holding their own. At least … the battleship is. There’s only one destroyer left. Allied pilots have devastated the enemy fighter squadrons but at a cost. Pahxin command is reporting at least a dozen casualties on their side.”
Desmond was about to say something else when the screen caught his attention. Their opponent picked up speed, racing toward them. Bombs struck the side, plowing into the shields in a devastating display of bright lights and explosions. Even as the shields went down and the hull opened up, the vessel continued forward.
“Direct hits …” Vincent’s voice trailed off. “Oh …”
“Zach,” Desmond said, but the pilot waved his hand.
“I see what he’s doing.” Zach grunted. “This is going to be unpleasant.” He tapped the console and spoke to the ship. “This is your pilot speaking. Please grab something and hold tight. This ride’s about to get bumpy.” He ran his fingers along his touch screen, grabbed the edge of the console and slapped something in the center.
The ship lurched, and Desmond flopped against Vincent from the sudden motion of it. Pressure held him in place for almost ten seconds before he was thrust backward, pinned into the cushion of his seat.
“What the hell are you doing, Zach?”
“Getting us out of here,” Zach replied. “If he means to ram us, he’s going to have to find some speed out of that wreck. Otherwise, I’m not granting him a parting shot today.”
The view screen switched to a rear camera, showing the destroyer barreling down on them. Fire billowed from its sides, great globes of orange and red, bursting from the seams as it lumbered closer. A thought crept into Desmond’s mind of some fantastic beast, letting loose its fury through flames and rage.
“Their reactor is going critical,” Salina said. “Not from the damage we did either. It looks like they’ve set it to go up like that.”

“That’s definitely a parting shot,” Desmond replied. “What’s minimum safe distance?”
“We’ll get there,” Zach called out. “Order the pilots to hall ass away though. The shockwave wouldn’t make them feel particularly good about the situation.”
Vincent got on the com and gave the order, straining against the continuous speed holding them firmly in their seats. The destroyer began to tumble, their engines failing. All at once, it went up, a massive explosion that blanked out the camera. Desmond held his breath … The ship rattled wildly and he was nearly tossed from his seat.
“He’s gone!” Zach shouted. “Damage to rear thrusters … seems to be minimal. I’ve still got maneuvering.”
“Salina, damage report!” Desmond shouted the words, gritting his teeth against the constant g force holding him in place.
“Minimal damage to housing,” Salina announced. “Shields are completely down. Emitters are burned out. Relays throughout the ship have also sparked. We’ll need some minor repairs before we can enter hyperspace. Engineering will gather an ETA when we’ve slowed down and they can get around their department again.”
“I think we’re good now, Zach,” Desmond said. “Slow us down. Get the pilots on board ASAP and send a message to the Stalwart. We’re down to ground ops at this point and if they need some help …” He considered their damage and what they’d been through. If they wanted to leave quickly, they couldn’t get back in the mix. Not without tremendous risk.
“Sir?” Salina asked. “What do you want me to tell them?”
“They might be out of luck,” Desmond replied. He didn’t like it but he had to think of the rest of the mission. The most important part: getting the Orb back home. If they couldn’t manage that, then everything else would’ve been for nothing. Attacking the Kalrawv, landing on the planet, engaging the Tol’An. “But if they need us … we’ll do what we can.”
Survival first, mission second. That’s what set them apart from both the Kalrawv Group and the Tol’An.

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Chapter 10

Cassie caught the conversation between Gizan and the Stalwart but a security block prevented her from intervening. She put a camera on the mining section where the Kalrawv forces were gathered and zeroed in on the speaker. Her eyes narrowed as she took him in and it dawned on her that she recognized him by description.

But Jayla interrupted. “That’s him!” She shouted. “That’s the man who killed Dak and nearly killed me! He must be the Tol’An infiltrator!”

The base alarm lit up, talking about intruders. That seems a little late, Cassie thought. “Shouldn’t that have gone off when we got here?”

“I don’t know why it’s going off now.” Jayla peered at another screen. “Oh … um … maybe it’s those two groups.”

Cassie looked and sighed. At least twenty Tol’An forces poured in at one point of the base and the Pahxin military, numbering around thirty, came from another. According to the schematics, they’d meet somewhere in the middle. When the marines arrived, most of the civilians were at work in different mine shafts around the facility. Several of the miners left their post, moving directly into harm’s way.

“Can we communicate with those people?” Cassie pointed. “Tell them they have to go back to their quarters or something?”

“I can try.” Jayla started working the controls. “Something’s jamming us … and they shouldn’t be able to, considering how much control we have up here.”

“Damn it!” Cassie turned to Vine. “I’m pretty sure the Tol’An we’re talking about is the one who kidnapped Admiral Reach and the Pahxin ambassador. He’s probably how the Tol’An got here but worse, he’s pretending to be Kalrawv. He has them helping him! We have to warn Heat and the others.”

“I will,” Vine said, “but in all honesty, what’s it matter? Whoever’s down there is going to put up a fight.”

“They’re planting explosives,” Jayla pointed out. “Look, they’re putting charges on the wall.”

“That’s where … well … what we’re looking for is behind that wall.”

Cassie checked the position of the marines. They were closing in but wouldn't be there for another several minutes. Reinforcements would be too busy to assist, and it was hard to get an accurate count of opposition in the mine. "Vine, can they handle whatever they find in there?"

"Those weapons are nasty," Vine replied. "Still … I think we'll be fine. We've got heavier gear than they do. And if they don't get that wall open, we'll definitely bust it down. One way or another."

"Wait, what??" Jayla cried. "Look! The Tol'An! They're … What are they doing?"

Cassie looked over her shoulder, noting that the Tol'An forces were darting into a maintenance tunnel. "Where's that go?"

"I honestly don't know," Jayla said. "I'm sure it goes to that mine though. Why else would they be heading down it? I suppose they could be planning to blow up the facility, I've heard they do that kind of thing … just straight murder innocent people? It happens all the time according to the vid feeds."

"No, I think they're here to back up this … Gizan guy." Cassie shook her head. "That's going to complicate the fight for our people." She turned to Vine. "None of them care about this area now. You should get down there and back them up. Or meet up with the Pahxin and give them a heads-up."

"I have orders to stay here," Vine said. "Work on the com and reach out to the Pahxin. I'll let Fielding and Heat know what we learned and see what they want me to do. Otherwise, I'm staying right here and protecting this room and you." He turned away to get on the com.

"Okay," Cassie muttered, "that's a soldier for you." She looked at Jayla. "We have access to the sensor relays, right? Can't we use those to counter all this … jamming?"

"Some of it is from your ship," Jayla replied. "That's going to be difficult to overcome. But internal jamming? From the Tol'An? Yes, I think I can." She hurried over to one of the consoles and popped it open. "I just need to bypass some of the security and safety measures … That will give us access to what we need."

"Perfect!" Cassie tried to find the exact frequency the Tol'An was

using to jam their signals. Once Jayla finished, they'd be able to cancel it out and hopefully have an easier time intercepting Kalrawv and Tol'An communications. Controlling the conversations would help settle the situation, even as the marines rushed into what would definitely be a final fight.

I hope Vine can get in contact with them, Cassie thought as she worked. They're in for quite the surprise if they show up thinking they only have a few security personnel to deal with. At least the Tol'An weapons aren't as terrifying. That's a small consolation for the odds they'll be facing but reinforcements are on the way. Good luck, guys. We'll do what we can.

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Heat led the way for his team, hustling down a hallway that supposedly led to the mining tunnel in question. Sweat soaked his clothes to his body and his legs ached, despite the fact the armor provided so much assistance. They still had a fight on the way, a brawl he didn't anticipate would amount to much.

There couldn't be that many people waiting for them.

When Vine connected with him, the man sounded nervous. Heat couldn't remember the last time Vine had really worried about anything. Fielding was on the line as well and he offered up a report, telling them about incoming Tol'An forces and the reinforcements that probably wouldn't get there in time to help.

"Sounds tough," Fielding said. "Chances are good the Tol'An can't get the Orb out of there before you and the Pahxin sweep in and crush them. I'd recommend you wait for the backup and go in with a larger force. Wipe them out then bring home the prize. It's the best guarantee we've got."

"Begging your pardon, sir," Heat replied, "but I'm pretty sure the Tol'An are too wily for that. If Vine's right and they're about to blow the wall, they'll be hauling that thing out of here like a bunch of rioters in a smash and grab. At the very least, we have to lock them down so they can't move with it. And that means engaging."

“I think it sounds too dangerous,” Fielding said. “You don’t even have your full unit.”
Heat grunted. “We won’t need it. The shaft we’re going to is pretty wide open, but the entrance isn’t. We can post there and take shots at them. Vine, find out if there’s another way out of there that these assholes can use to escape. If not, we’ve got them. If so, then we’d better plan on rushing in there and wiping them out fast.”
Fielding was silent for a time. When he spoke, he began with a sigh. “I’ll contact the Pahxin and see if I can get a no bullshit estimate on when they can be there. Maybe we can have them hustle. I don’t like it, Heat but do what you have to do down there. You’ve got more experience with these terrorist assholes than I do.”
Heat privately thanked whatever God was out there that the Lieutenant saw things his way. If he hadn’t … Well, they would’ve had words when the marines returned to the Gnosis. One way or another, Heat was going into that mine shaft and taking on whatever enemies they found.
If that meant disobeying orders, in this case, he was willing to take that chance.
“When we get there,” Heat explained, “I want two people taking cover near the entrance. The rest of us will charge in. Vine, what’s in there that we can use for cover, anyway? Can you pipe the feed down to us?”
“With all this interference,” Vine replied, “I doubt it … but there’s plenty of heavy machinery you can use. You’ll see when you get there. If the Tol’An get there first though … That’s going to be a rough space to hold, Gunny. Lots of firepower being tossed around in there and don’t forget, it might not be structurally sound.”
“You’re a total ray of sunshine, Vine,” Gillet said. “I’ll remember that when we’re back on the ship and give you a God damn hug. Pretty clear your mamma never bothered.”
“That’s enough.” Heat waved a hand at Gillet. The ceiling transitioned from manmade metal to natural rock. Another twenty feet, the walls did the same. Two forms seemed to be lying on the ground up ahead. He lifted his weapon, casting a wary eye about the area. “Contact …

Sort of."

Gillet stepped forward to investigate. "They're dead. Looks like a knife. They're armed, too so someone managed to get real close first."

"The Tol'An prick that Cassie was talking about," Heat said. "Wearing a Kalrawv uniform. I bet his new buddies don't know he did this. Move out."

They moved into the tunnel, leaving behind the metal floor for rock. Heat's HUD showed there was plenty of oxygen down there, that some kind of environmental control system was in full effect. Temperature showed a little on the high side as it pushed eighty degrees Fahrenheit which probably made the miners pretty miserable once they really got going for the day.

Scans indicated they were approaching life forms, several of them. Kalrawv or Tol'An? They didn't hear any violence so he doubted the latter had shown up yet. Once the imposter had his own people to boss around, he wouldn't need anyone else. Of course, they were about to blow up a wall for him.

Maybe he hoped they wouldn't survive the blast.

"We're about to enter the main area," Heat said. "Check your targets in case there are—"

An explosion shook the floor, making dust fall from the ceiling. The marines around Heat held their weapons up, each ready to start shooting. "We're not being shelled," he said. "That was them blowing the wall. If the Orb's behind it, they probably see it right now. Let's make this quick while they're distracted by the pretty."

Heat picked up the pace, dashing forward. His HUD showed an influx of new targets, additional life forms in the larger room ahead. Great, his buddies made it. The maintenance tunnel they used likely wouldn't have worked for the marines considering their armor, but a light unit probably made a quick run of it.

That's how they were already there and that's why Heat and his crew were about to have their hands full. Even as he knew they didn't have time, half of him wanted to wait for his own reinforcements. Fielding was right that it would be the smart thing to do but maybe not the best course of action considering the severity of the situation.

At least the Tol'An don't have those sonic weapons. That'll be a small favor.
Shouting filled the air, then the wheezing of the sonic weapons. Familiar beam weapons discharged, the Tol'An taking shots. Heat rushed ahead, reaching the larger room and moving in without pause, taking cover behind a massive drill. The few steps between the opening and that safety revealed a wild display of chaotic violence. Tol'An soldiers, dressed in their black jump suits stood their ground while blasted away at the Kalrawv security forces, who ran for cover. Gillet called out to him, asking for target prioritization. He struggled with the question. There were more Tol'An but their weapons weren't as nasty.
"Targets of opportunity," Heat shouted. "If you've got a shot, take it. I don't care who it is out there. Wrap this up!"
Their projectile weapons added to the clatter, guns popping as the marines engaged. Heat leaned out and fired some quick bursts, tearing through a Tol'An who stood in the open as if he were immune to weapon fire.
A couple more went down, torn up by both the Kalrawv agents and other marines. The combined firepower finally drove them to take some cover of their own as their superior numbers were whittled down. Another couple of explosions went off, smaller than the first. Heat put his money on grenades but couldn't see from his vantage. As before, dust fell from the ceiling, this time with chunks of rock accompanying it. Heat's HUD offered a warning about structural integrity, then gave him a reading on how many tons of ground happened to be suspended above them. Not the time! Heat darted from behind cover again, taking another couple of shots.
Two of the yellow beams whizzed by him and he had to hit the dirt to avoid being caught by them. Kalrawv tried to take back the initiative, shouting to one another as they laid into the two forces with their superior weapons.
Heat risked a glance toward the wall. It had opened up into a metal chamber, not at all the rock formation surrounding them. Five guys were rolling the Orb out, moving toward a tall passage to the left.

That must be there for all this heavy equipment. It probably has a straight shot to some kind of docking bay too.
The fight continued but those five guys, and probably Gizan, all made their way out of the conflict.
“We don’t have time for this!” Heat shouted. “We need to get after those guys! They’ve got the Orb!”
“Kinda pinned down over here!” Gillet shouted.
“I can’t go either!” Bosh called as well. “We’ve gotta secure this room first!”
“Damn it.” Heat considered his options. The other sounded off that they were in a bad place to go for it. He looked to his right, noting he had the larger machine providing cover to the wall. He might be able to make it but then, he’d be facing five on his own. I don’t mind those odds. “Gillet, I’m going for it.”
“Gunny, are you nuts?”
“I have pretty decent cover all the way to their exit point. I’ll at least try to slow them down while the rest of you clear up this rabble.”
Heat rolled back toward his cover and rose, pausing at the edge. He was about to dart out. “Hey, catch up as soon as you can, huh? I like your company.”
Heat dashed out and ran beside the wall. He made it ten paces before energy beams slapped the wall over his head, showering him with pebbles. Another ten paces got him to another machine and cover from the Tol’An. A Kalrawv security soldier turned and stared at him, spinning his weapon around to take a shot.
Heat already had the initiative and blasted him center mass with two three round bursts. The body collapsed backward and someone shouted just as Heat started running again.
Another soldier appeared in front of him and he threw his arm out, clotheslining him in the chin with all the enhanced strength the power armor afforded. Heat didn’t even feel the collapse of the man’s bones, but he knew it happened. He also couldn’t risk taking a look behind him as he was nearly to his destination.
Two Tol’An stood guard at the passage and they started firing as Heat approached. The first energy blast struck his torso armor, which

absorbed it completely. Another hit his shoulder but a third missed. Heat returned fire, catching one in the head and the other in the stomach chest. The first died immediately but the other wore a shield. He dropped to the ground but remained alive, struggling to regain his footing. Before he could, Heat charged up and kicked him in the face. The shield couldn't protect him against that and his head caved in. Heat made it to the passage and charged in, hoping he wasn't too late. "I'm in guys," he announced. "Sooner you can get here the better." He saved the rest of his breath for the fight to come. It promised to be one of the more nasty ones he'd ever been in.

***

Micah sensed when the bombs hit the destroyer before anything else. A part of him knew they'd gone off, some extrasensory perception he only had due to rampaging adrenaline. The concussive force of all that ordnance tore through the enemy's defenses, but it wasn't enough to obliterate it entirely.

Those were some solid shields.

The enemy ship charged the Gnosis, moving toward them at ramming speed. Oh God. Micah's heart raced, and he craned his neck to see. Flames burst from where they'd been struck, and the engines flickered but still managed to compel them forward at an alarming speed.

There's no way they're going to catch the Gnosis … But Micah couldn't put much conviction behind the thought. He was shocked to see his home ship practically spin on a dime and burst away at top speed. Zach knows how to handle that bus like a real pro. God, I don't envy him right now.

Micah's computer started buzzing, indicating he'd made it to the minimal safe distance. He didn't slow down, allowing the engines to remain in the redline for a little longer. Still, his attention remained fixed on the destroyer as it chased the Gnosis, like some kind of rampaging demon out of a horror movie.

When it finally couldn't go on anymore, the reactor went critical, shattering the vessel like a piece of porcelain. One moment, it was a

flaming behemoth, the next, merely an empty space where only embers remained. But even as it disappeared from existence, seemingly with all hands, the aftermath battered the Gnosis from behind.

Micah watched the shields flare and wink out. Various bits sparked over the surface of the hull before going dark. Thrusters shut down and the ship seemed to drift, lumbering away from the force of being shoved by the explosion. He held his breath, wondering if they had been destroyed or somehow finished off.

Half a moment later, the engines came to life but only the environmental shields lit up. Someone was alive, at the very least, and the ship itself survived. He looked forward to docking, to help out with whatever needed to happen for the return trip. But first, he tuned into the search and rescue com channel, patching it in for the others.

"This is Rhino Two. Our squadron is available to assist with pick up efforts. Please direct us and we'll do what we can."

"Glad to hear from you," Commander Bowman replied. His voice was mired in static, but he was still legible. "We have a number of downed ships out there that need some help. I'm sending you coordinates."

"Got it." Micah cleared his throat. "How's Nolan? Did he make it?"

"Just," Bowman said. "Right before the destroyer went off, he landed. When things settle down, he's heading to sick bay but right now, he's helping secure the hangar for everyone coming back. Hey … I wanted to tell you … thanks. You did great work out there. It was you that finished it off. Thank you."

"No problem … and I'm glad to hear he's okay." Micah grinned. "You guys hear that?"

"Thank you, sir," Mariah added. "That was … intense. Can you believe they blew their own reactor?"

"I'm going to let you guys get to it. If you need anything, speak up. The com's a little crowded right now, though so keep it to a minimum on the open. Bowman out."

"I can believe it," Deanne added as the Commander dropped off. "They've proven they don't have any sort of real self-preservation to speak of. The last time we met these creeps, remember?"

“Well, we do,” Micah added. “And now, let’s prove it by finding our people. Come on. Looks like Mustang One’s first on the list. Area’s still a little hot but we’ve got quite a bit of firepower between us, so we’ll carve a perimeter and get these folks back. We’ll be there long before the shuttles. Let’s put the time to good use.”

***

Gizan ordered the duped Kalrawv men to blow the wall. The detonation would go off before his people arrived, but they’d be there soon. Just in time to help remove the Trindisha. They had a direct line to the surface from the maintenance tunnels, a bit he picked up from downloading the schematics.

His Kalrawv lackeys gawked at their find, eyes wide. The officer probably knew what it was, but he played ignorant. Gizan smiled, still playing the role. “Behold why we’re here. The power to elevate our company to new heights. I suppose you’re all glad you listened to me now, eh?”

One of them shouted, gesturing as the Tol’An men poured into the room. Gizan quickly tore off the top of his uniform so he wouldn’t be killed by friendly fire. A firefight broke out, driving him to cover. He gestured wildly at several of his men, ordering them to advance on his position.

Kalrawv weapons tore some of them down but when Gizan fired into their backs, they were forced to seek their own cover. That bought time for five Tol’An to arrive and they dislodged the Trindisha from its home. It appeared to be some forgotten room, a space used by the previous people who had lived there before.

Human weapons went off, barking off the ceiling. Gizan cursed. Their soldiers were not as easily beaten back as the Kalrawv dogs were. He needed to move quickly if he hoped to get his prize to the ship.

“Act as if your lives depend on this!” Gizan shouted. “Because I assure you it is true. If this is not on the ship before we leave, you will all die. Me too, likely. Now … go! Hurry!”

They hoisted it out, kicking the fragile rocks out of the way before

rolling it into the open area. Gizan didn't bother to request they be careful. He knew the thing was tough but even if it wasn't, they didn't have the luxury of time. Five men shoved it toward the opening, which appeared to be just about right to get the Trindisha through it. I'm glad these fools have multiple avenues to bring in their mining toys. Gizan drove his people on, shouting at them to hurry. The battle raged around them and the echoes of shouts and weapon fire made it so he had to scream at the top of his lungs to be heard over the clamor.

Once they were in the tunnel, the sound deadened somewhat but they were hampered by moving uphill. Gizan threw himself against the Trindisha, helping them shove it up the hill. The combined strength of all of them made decent time. He wasn't entirely sure how far they had to go but providing his people kept the other soldiers busy, it wouldn't matter.

They took a right as the incline increased. Light up ahead indicated they were approaching outside. A loading dock sat there and one of the Tol'An shuttles waited. Gizan felt the thrill of success teasing the back of his neck, spurring him on. If he wanted, he would be back in the good grace of Ezria.

Succeeding meant making difficult choices, it meant deciding what to do with the rest of his life. One thing he absolutely vowed was to ensure they remained in his hands alone. That was the important part. No more would he be the puppet of another, allowing his fate to teeter on another's whim.

Especially not a man like Ezria, who quite easily and readily killed his own people for minor infractions. The men around him knew what their leader was like. Some of them may have even lost friends to his mercurial attitude. When Gizan returned the Trindisha, he felt it may be time to part ways with the Tol'An for good.

A shout behind them gave him pause. The other men continued shoving. He turned, cocking his head as he listened to the heavy footfalls of a human marine. That blasted armor! He cursed. How did this fool get through the others? The Kalrawv? Our own people? He must have an absolute death wish!

Gizan drew the sonic weapon from his belt and considered how to proceed. If he missed, the man would likely kill him with ease. Perhaps that wasn't necessary. Suppressing him may be enough to buy his people some time. They didn't need much. Once the Trindisha was on board, they could flee the system.

Victory would be theirs.

But where does that leave me? Gizan really questioned that. He already determined he wanted to leave the Tol'An behind. Was it worth risking his life in that moment to preserve their victory? Honor suggested he fulfill his obligation. Regardless of his future, he committed to the present and that meant success.

What would the Tol'An do with another Trindisha? Ezria didn't care about the wondrous technology that could come from the devices. He wanted power sources, information about his enemy's whereabouts and ultimately, the ability to control the universe. What others did with them didn't have any bearing on the man's plans.

It was a far cry from the way things worked before.

Gizan shook his head. "No," he muttered. "I will not betray the Tol'An today. I may never return, but I will do my duty today."

He saw the marine making his way up the incline. Taking aim, Gizan fired twice, the wheezing gun discharging two yellow beams that raced toward his target. The marine hit the ground the instant he pulled the trigger, avoiding both attacks while returning fire.

Gizan dove for cover. One of his own people cried out in pain. A glance back showed he'd taken three bullets to the back, right in the spine. The damage caused him to hit the floor, screaming in agony. His fellows didn't even look down at him as they continued shoving the Trindisha toward its destination.

"You're only one man!" Gizan shouted from the tiny cover of a protruding rock. "You should just go back the other way. You've lost this round. We have the Trindisha. Save your life for another battle, human!"

"Not how we operate," the marine yelled back. "Pahxin forces are locking the facility down. We've got air superiority. Do you really think you're getting off the planet with that thing? Just leave it there

and I'm sure you can escape with your lives. We'll be too busy securing the Orb."

"That's right, you have a colloquial name for what you don't understand." Gizan sneered. "I stand here ready to kill you, human. I've got one of the Kalrawv weapons. Your precious little armor you encase yourself in won't protect you. Besides, how much longer will you allow yourself to be delayed? My people are succeeding."

"Maybe," the marine replied, "but I've still got one of these. Might put a damper on your … success."

Gizan risked a glance. He didn't know what was happening to the man's back but something on the armor was moving. Is the fool going to blow the power core on that thing? It could destroy the entire tunnel! He turned and began to run, dashing toward the exit. A sudden hiss filled the air and he risked another look.

A projectile raced along the passage, not necessarily toward Gizan but certainly in his direction. A gray-white stream of smoke erupted from the back of it, leaving behind a mist in its wake.

He dove to the floor, landing hard enough for the stone to dig into his elbows, forearms and knees. Pain danced through his nerves, but he shrugged it off while tilting his head just in time to see the thing fly over him. It struck the mouth of the cavern near the men with the Trindisha, exploding in a spectacular bright flash.

Chunks of the wall collapsed, crushing one of Gizan's men and rolling over another's leg. They were immobilized, temporarily trapped by the attack. If the ship was ready, there'd be other men who could help dislodge it but not before they had to contend with additional troops barreling down on their position.

Gizan turned to look at the marine who had reclaimed his feet and began to advance. The Trindisha no longer concerned him nearly as much as surviving the next few moments. As he scrambled for his weapon, he realized he'd dropped it when he fell. Armed with only a knife, he needed to make a choice on how to proceed: flee and live or risk death by staying.

***

Gillet tapped his jump jets, aiming himself to the left. His body was thrown toward cover and he landed hard, rolling several times until he came to a halt against the wall. Tol'An forces kept coming from the wall, as if they had a never-ending supply. The Kalrawv operatives stopped firing, electing to cower in the relative safety of their positions.

The other marines popped off shots, maintaining their mobility throughout the fight. They darted between different bits of cover, but they were taking some serious damage. He hadn't been able to take a census, but at least two men had gone down, possibly dead. Regardless of their defenses or the number they killed, the odds were stacked against them.

An energy blast hit Gillet's left arm, spinning him in place. He hit the ground, leaning against one of the large pieces of machinery. His HUD showed minimal damage, but his shoulder hurt like hell. Probably dislocated, at least a little bit. He tried to move it and winced. Yeah, this is the problem with wearing the armor: it's not so easy to shove back in.

"Human marine units," a soft voice spoke in his helmet. "This is Finda of the Stalwart. We are coming upon your rear. Please check your fire as we are here to reinforce you. Please respond."

"About time!" Gillet shouted. "Watch your fire to the six, guys!" Despite the hope he felt filling his chest, he still aimed his weapon down the hall back toward where their supposed allies were coming. If they were lying, if they somehow managed to break the coms and were enemies, he didn't want to be shot in the back.

Blaster fire tore at his cover, chipping it away as chunks of metal were thrown clear. As Gillet looked around, he noted the other marines were in similar situations. If they tried to move, they'd likely be tagged. It was a nasty situation that would've required rockets to even the odds.

Unfortunately, the roof didn't seem to be structurally sound, at least not enough to take a couple more explosions. The Tol'An had already saw to that.

The first of the Pahxin men dashed inside, wearing their blue uniforms. When they started shooting at the Tol'An, Gillet finally let himself believe they'd been saved. He gave them a moment to pour in, nearly twenty of them right away, before he ordered the marines to get up and help.

Concentrated fire drove the Tol'An back toward the maintenance tunnel they'd entered from, which kept them away from Heat. Several Pahxin dashed after them, running headlong into the corridor with their weapons at the ready. The firefight continued in there while other Pahxin secured prisoners of the Kalrawv people.

Another explosion sounded down the hallway and Gillet scowled. God damn it! Was it the Tol'An again or had Heat done something crazy? Before he could ask, Heat's voice filled his helmet. "Listen up, I need the transport shuttle to come down to my position. There may be Tol'An ships in the area but this is an urgent request for evac."

Establishing your coordinates now." The response came from some pilot, but the words were so colored in static it was impossible to make out which one.

"Heat?" Gillet asked. "You're still alive up there! What the hell was that explosion? Are you okay?"

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Chapter 11

Heat watched the rocket fly, bringing down massive chunks of wall onto the retreating Tol'An. He recognized the gamble, knew it could've ended badly but he didn't have a lot of options. Time, as always, worked directly against him. Inaction would've cost him the Orb, just as action almost did the same.

Heat got to his feet and began to advance. "Connect to tactical com." The words made his armor comply. It only took a moment before a green light on his HUD showed he would be heard. "Listen up, I need the transport shuttle to come down to my position. There may be Tol'An ships in the area, but this is an urgent request for evac."

"Establishing your coordinates now." A static filled response made him wince. He didn't even know who spoke.

"Heat?" Gillet asked. "You still alive up there? What the hell was that explosion? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Heat replied. "But if you're available, I could sure use some backup right about now."

"Pahxin got here and helped us out. We'll be right there."

Heat breathed a sigh of relief. The man who spoke earlier seemed to be gone. Only three of the five Tol'An who worked on the Orb were still alive, but they'd managed to get the device outside. Heat took aim and fired, grazing one on the shoulder just as they moved left beyond his view.

Damn it! Heat picked up the pace, racing after them. He reached the opening and slowed down, risking a quick peek. A Tol'An ship sat on a docking pad just two hundred yards away. Several men were running toward the Orb, their weapons hanging from their shoulders as they moved.

Heat considered what to do. If he fired in a way that might suppress the men out there, he'd undoubtedly hit the Orb. He had no idea how volatile the thing was. No one ever tried to shoot them back on Earth, not as far as he knew. Cassie and Thayne talked about them being power sources and that meant it could probably blow up.

I have to be cautious. Heat thought about that and realized maybe being careful was the exact wrong thing to do. He checked his HUD, noting the wind was a lot calmer on that side of the facility than it had been when they arrived. It might still be dangerous, but he could put himself in the way of their escape. God, I hope this is a good idea.
Heat stepped outside and hit the jump pack, flying high into the air. He didn't clear the stone wall to his left, it towered another hundred feet above him. The wind slapped at him, but he was able to use maneuvering bursts from his thrusters, keeping him from veering too far off course.
He sailed over the Orb and managed to land in front of the walkway leading to the Tol'An cargo ship. The other soldiers had just cleared it and were moving toward the Orb when they spun in place. Well, shit.
Heat took aim and started firing, blasting into their ranks. He still had to take care not to get the Orb but at least there were more targets to catch his rounds.
The sky opened up, pouring rain down upon the area. Drops slapped Heat's helmet, causing tiny beads to rush across his vision. He put himself in motion, turning into a moving target as he laid into the crowd. They did the same, darting toward him and moving to the left and right.
Three of them went down in his first pass but he paid for his victory. A shot caught his leg and another nailed him in the torso, just below the chest. He used the jump pack again, this time to buy him a moment of relief from the constant barrage of energy beams.
When Heat came down a good twenty feet away, he nearly toppled off the walkway to the ground below. The ground looked small from his height, but the worst part was the fact that he didn't have anywhere else to move. Another jump was the only way to evade and as the Tol'An took aim to fire again, he had to risk it.
The storm intensified. Thunder accompanied the downpour. Lightning lanced through the sky. Close by, a sound of engines rumbled, echoing off the rocks. Heat launched himself again, this time moving toward the docked Tol'An vessel. He landed just in front of their ramp, tossing a grenade inside.

A shout inside threw some men into action. One of them darted out just as it went off. Heat blasted the man before he made it two feet and shoved his body to the side, darting onto the space craft.

Heat found himself in a cargo bay, only barely large enough to get the Orb on board. A hallway led off toward the cockpit and he saw some chairs facing one another along the way. His grenade killed one, incapacitated another but down the hall, others had managed to escape the worst of it.

He fell back so he wasn't standing in the door and opened up on the mouth of the hallway, suppressing the others from coming into the room. Injuries began to catch up with him, pain from being shot in multiple locations. The armor held, but the concussion went right through somehow.

"I'm on the enemy ship," Heat announced to his com. "I'll try to keep them from boarding, but I can't make any promises right now. This … was probably my craziest idea to date."

"You think?" Gillet asked. "We're about to come outside now. Pahxin are with us and one of our ships is almost to the scene. They were going to blast the Tol'An ship, man. We can't now that you're on board."

"Sorry," Heat replied, "there wasn't a lot of choice for me out there alone."

Gunfire erupted outside as the marines closed on the enemy flank. A couple energy beams burst through the hallway, slapping the wall to Heat's left. He returned fire until his magazine was spent. Dropping the mag, he leaned into the wall. Anyone trying to hit him would have to commit to leaning out.

Heat slapped another magazine into his weapon and took aim, forcing himself to be patient. Finally, one of the Tol'An popped his head out and Heat's finger squeezed the trigger, killing the target in an instant. He waited for another when a blast to his right drew his attention to the door.

Cursing, he felt the blast before he could even look. It hit him right in the side just below the ribs, pressing him into the wall before he lost his footing and slid to the ground. Another blast caught him in the

chest and pain welled up through his senses, making his vision go white. He coughed, struggling to lift his weapon.
I guess this is it. The thought danced through Heat's mind, giving him a sense of acceptance. The Tol'An advanced on him, their weapons at the ready. At any moment, they would open up, ending the battle.
Here I come, Gorman. I guess you couldn't be alone for long after all.

***

Gillet and his men burst out onto the walk, opening up on the Tol'An surrounding the Orb. They abandoned the device, darting about for cover that wasn't there. One of them fell off the landing, tumbling down hundreds of feet to a messy death.
As suddenly as they had started dashing about, they charged the marines and Pahxin, shouting in defiance. They were cut down in a few moments, torn apart by concentrated fire from well over twenty weapons. A couple stray rounds got through, but Gillet's people finished that fight in a hurry.
More blasts went off nearby and he saw several Tol'An darting toward the shuttle. Rain battered him from all sides, but he risked a jump anyway, throwing himself over to the ramp leading aboard the vessel. When he landed with a massive clatter, one of the Tol'An spun just in time to see the brief muzzle flashes of Gillet's rifle before being cut down.
The others turned but Gillet kept shooting, finishing them off in quick succession.
More marines joined him as the Pahxin secured the Orb. Gillet led them on board. Heat was collapsed in the corner, his armor scorched and blackened from energy beams. "Check on him," he gestured. "Get him out of here. We don't have to clear this thing. Just keep your weapons aimed so they don't come out."
Two marines collected Heat and dragged him off the ship. Gillet was the last one to depart, stepping backward down the ramp so he could keep his weapon trained on the hallway. None of the enemy seemed to be willing to peek out. When the ramp started to lift, he understood

why.
They intended to flee.
“The Tol’An shuttle is departing,” Gillet said over the com. “They do not have the Orb. I repeat, the Orb is in our possession.”
“That’s great news,” Fielding replied, though his message was garbled pretty bad. “Sounds like we’ve got this one in the bag right now, gentleman. Where’s the Gunny?”
“I’m checking on him now.” Gillet stepped over to Heat and crouched beside him and Bosh. “How’s he doing?”
“He’s hurt,” Bosh replied, “but okay. His com’s messed up though. Looks like his armor took a real pounding.”
The shuttle launched beside them, rocketing away from the area. Their own took its place a moment later, landing with a metallic thump that echoed off the rocks. “Let’s get him on board. He goes back with the Orb.” Gillet turned to the Pahxin. “If you need to get anyone to a medical bay, this is going straight back to the Gnosis.”
Wounded were gathered and deposited on the shuttle. Gillet paced away, looking over the carnage of dead bodies and damage done by the battle. He shook his head, wondering how many people died during the operation. He knew they had lost some of their own. It had been a bloody situation.
Heat’s voice crackled in his speakers just after the ramp closed to the shuttle. “Hey,” he muttered. “The Tol’An guy Cassie talked about … He got away.”
“Slippery son of a bitch,” Gillet muttered. “We’ll look for him. Are you okay? What the hell happened?”
“I got shot … a lot. This armor saved my life but that automatic shield thing never kicked in for me. I guess I burned it out doing something else.”
“Hang in there, buddy. This getting hurt thing’s starting to become a habit.”
“Not one I’m happy with,” Heat replied. “Make sure Cassie gets back to the ship okay … and that we’ve really wrapped up down here. You’re in charge. Don’t let me down.”
“You just relax and worry about feeling better,” Gillet said. “I’ll see

you back on the ship." He turned to the others. "We're going back to the control room to grab Agent Alexander before we leave this planet. Fall in behind me, folks. There's still a dangerous animal running around this base and we can't afford to let our guard down now."

***

Ulian's heart thumped hard in his chest as the Tol'An vessels disengaged the Kalrawv battleship and started to flee the scene. The only reason they would be leaving is if they finished their objective, if they found their prize. His mind raced as he tried to decide what to do, and how to slow them down.

But it was evident that the vessels near to his ship wouldn't have the Trindisha on them. They were there to distract the military forces while the smaller ships went to the surface. They hadn't been able to harass them enough to prevent their landing and now, they seemed to have succeeded.

The final Kalrawv destroyer was destroyed, leaving only the battleship standing between them and a decisive military victory. Morala had proven herself capable of leading such an attack, albeit in a brusque manner. They would've walked away with a complete victory if the humans had been able to secure their target.

I cannot believe that Captain Bradford's people would have failed.

"Engaging final target," Morala said. "Erda, target their aft section, thirty meters from the thrusters. Concentrate all fire on that point."

"Ma'am?" Erda asked.

"I noticed the Tol'An were pounding that area pretty hard," Morala explained. "The defenses should be weakened there."

The battleship wasted no time in redirecting their own efforts, firing on the Stalwart as soon as they were no longer being harassed by the Tol'An. A number of energy blasts struck the ship, causing it to shake violently. When they stabilized, Erda shot back, launching everything they had at the targeted area.

Ulian watched the view screen, brow furrowed in a grim expression. Their beams caught the hull of their target, popping holes in two

sections. Fire popped out for only a moment before emergency shields sealed the breach, but it would only be a matter of time before they were destroyed with that kind of damage.
“You were right, ma’am!” Erda shouted. “I’m powering up for another volley.”
“Damage report,” Morala said. “How bad did their attack hurt us?”
“Major damage to cargo bay two,” Viran said, “not a breach but all electronics are down … including gravity. Two crewmen were in there … it sounds like they might be …” She sighed. “Minor damage to crew decks six and seven. Observation deck has also been brought offline.”
“Non-essentials, one and all,” Morala muttered. “Good. They didn’t bother to target us, they just shot blindly and hoped. Return fire, Erda. Knock them out of the sky.”
“Belay that order,” Ulian said, stepping in. “Viran, raise the enemy ship and offer them terms.”
Morala shot a look at him. “Sir, begging your pardon, but the Kalrawv Group are well known for never surrendering.”
“And that will likely hold true here,” Ulian replied. “We have the upper hand, we’re going to make the offer. Remember, we can always destroy a ship but you can’t offer it mercy when it’s gone.”
Viran got on the com and reached out to the enemy vessel. Her calm voice offered them terms for surrender. After she finished, Erda cried out, slapping his console with several rapid taps. The ship lurched downward, nearly stealing Ulian’s breath before it stopped. Just as suddenly, they darted to the side, jostling everyone about.
“What happened?” Morala asked.
“Evasive maneuvers,” Erda said. “They fired again.”
Ulian shook his head. “Proceed, Morala.” He clenched his fist, frustrated by their decision. They are throwing away so many lives. What policy does that organization have that pushes people to the brink of death rather than survival? We must look into it and stop this practice. The waste … is disgusting.
Morala gave the order to fire and Erda followed throw, casting another volley in their opponent’s direction. The battleship began to

roll, fire billowing from the same surgical place they hit before. It might not have been enough to destroy their ship, but it took them out of the fight, at least temporarily.
“Fighters,” Morala said, “report. Have you mopped up the enemy forces?”
“The few that were left have fled,” came the reply. “We are initiating search and rescue at this time.”
Morala grinned, turning to Ulian. “I’d call this a decisive victory, would you not?”
Ulian nodded, still too ill with the decision of the Kalrawv to take much pleasure in the win. He’d completed several combat missions, most successfully but until he faced the Tol’An and these corporate mercenaries, his opponents always showed reasonable judgement. They offered quarter where it was necessary and surrendered when they could not win.
This new enemy disgusted him.
“Finish them off, Erda,” Morala said, “they’re likely going to blow their reactor. Don’t give them the chance.”
Ulian turned to his reports as the battleship was annihilated. All those lives, men and women, some of which weren’t even full-time employees of the corporation, were lost. If the Tol’An escaped with the Trindisha, then it was all for nothing. Every person dead would be chalked up to an overall failure.
Much as Morala wanted to take credit for a combat victory, it would be nothing if the true objective flew away.
He contacted the Gnosis to find out their status and discover what happened on the surface. Hopefully, they had some positive news, something to make up for the resources spent on their errand. He didn’t look forward to explaining what happened to his superiors if they weren’t bringing home the prize.
It would be the only justification for attacking the Kalrawv Group as they had.

***

Vincent smiled as he turned to Desmond, patting the captain on the shoulder. It drew an annoyed look. “I just heard from the marines,” he spoke quietly. “They secured the Orb and it’s on the way backup here right now!”

Desmond slumped in his seat. “That’s wonderful news. Thank God that worked out.” He turned to Salina. “Reach out to the Stalwart so we can give them the good news.” Looking back at Vincent, he asked, “what about Cassie and the others? Do we have any casualty reports yet?”

Vincent sobered and turned away. “Not yet. The marines sent the ship back up with the wounded and the Orb. They’ll return soon but Fielding didn’t tell me what they’re doing. He was trying to coordinate something. I’ll reach back out to him shortly. The bombers are on search and rescue. Our fighters are coming back home.”

“Good.” Desmond rubbed his eyes. “Has engineering given us an estimated time for when we can get out of here?”

“They’re working on it,” Salina said. “They’re working on required systems only. Anything else will be bonus at this point.”

Vincent tried to reach out to Cassie, sending a message to the surface. He cursed under his breath when the interference once again prevented it. How the hell is Fielding talking to them? He reached out to the lieutenant. “How can I speak to the people down there? Are you still able to?”

“There’s a massive electrical storm, sir,” Fielding replied. “That’s why we can’t reach the surface. It should pass in the next fifteen minutes. Then, we’ll be back in business.”

Fifteen minutes is a lifetime in a hostile environment. Vincent sighed. “Understood. Thank you for that.”

“Salina,” Desmond said, “get Ulian on screen. Let’s ease his mind a little.”

“They’re reaching out to us right now,” Salina replied. “I’ll put them on.”

Ulian appeared on the screen, brow furrowed. “Captain Bradford,” he spoke in a solemn tone of voice. “The Tol’An forces fled the system. Do you know if they were successful in taking the Trindisha? Do we

need to attempt a pursuit?"
Desmond shook his head. "We don't. Our boys have the Orb and are bringing it back to the Gnosis now."
Shock widened Ulian's eyes. "Why…why would they have left then? That makes no sense."
"I'll chalk it up to good fortune for us," Desmond replied. "We're wrapping up over here. How're things your way?"
"The same. The enemy forces are neutralized … our pilots are collecting those who had to eject." Ulian shrugged. "We need to conduct some repairs before we can go. What about those on the surface? We are not able to raise our soldiers there. The interference on that planet is incredible."
"Same for us," Desmond replied. "We did hear from them shortly before the electrical storm kicked in and that's how we know about the Orb. They're collecting the remainder of our people and they'll be on their way back. We have some repairs to do ourselves. No estimate on how long we'll need. Do you think the area is safe?"
"We'll form a perimeter," Ulian said. "And do whatever it takes to remain so until we can leave this system. We will be safe enough, Captain. Ulian out."
Vincent turned away from the interaction and started worrying about the people still on the surface. He couldn't even pretend it wasn't mostly about Cassie and that's why he didn't voice his concerns out loud. Desmond already knew his judgement wasn't entirely clear when it came to the Agent.
The fact she went down there at all bothered Vincent more than it should have. She was capable but after what had just happened to her, it seemed like an unnecessary risk. Still, she had managed to fix communications and God knows how useful she was on the surface. He would've rather her been on the bridge, helping them there.
I have to find a way to be okay with this. Though he wondered how long he had to worry about it. Once the Tol'An was defeated, the fighting would essentially end. There would be no war, no terrorist organization flying around causing trouble. Perhaps humanity could get on with the research and exploration they hoped for.

But until then, Cassie would not be leaving the Gnosis for the relative safety of Gamma Alpha and Vincent needed to come to terms with it. He busied himself with reports from various sections of the ship, focusing on helping department heads with their problems. It distracted him from his worries, but they remained, in the back of his mind.
And likely would until Cassie was back on the ship.

***

“Damn it!” Cassie slapped the side of the monitor out of frustration, drawing a wide-eyed look from Jayla. She sighed. “Sorry … I’m tired of all this interference. We can’t get through to the ship through that electrical storm. No matter what I’ve tried, tight beam, blasting it … Nothing’s working.”
“Gillet just talked to me,” Vine said. “They sent the Orb up to the Gnosis.”
“Did they leave us here?” Cassie asked.
Vine chuckled. “No, they’re on their way to us now.” He paused. “Oh.”
“What is it?” Jayla asked. “What’s the matter?”
“Um … one of the Tol’An guys … the one you talked about … Seems he got away.”
“No!” Jayla paced away from the terminal. “He was a mad man! A violent criminal!”
Cassie moved over and touched the woman’s shoulder. “Relax. We’re not going to let him do anything to you, Jayla. You’re safe with us.”
“Am I?” Jayla shook away, backing into the wall. “You people attacked this facility without provocation. And for what?”
“A Trindisha,” Cassie said. “Kalrawv came for it and that’s why we had to come. We’ll take you with us and get you out of here. From what I understand of this … company … they blame anyone they can for a failure. I don’t think you want to be here when they come around looking for that scapegoat.”
A wheezing shot sounded from one of the doorways. Vine cried out, falling to the floor in an instant. Cassie lifted her rifle and aimed it as

Gizan stepped into the room, pointing the Kalrawv pistol in her general direction. She swore she would tremble in his presence but instead, a severe calm fell over her, a profound state of focus.
Jayla, on the other hand, freaked out and fell to the floor. She started crying, covering her face.
“I see she hasn’t changed,” Gizan spat. “You’re with the human vessel … the Gnosis.”
Cassie nodded once but didn’t speak.
“My people left me. It seems you’ve won. Again.” Gizan shook his head. “I would like to understand your skill … your tenacity. The fact you employ women shows you have the same sort of sickening openness of the Pahxin government. Perhaps that’s where the Tol’An have failed. The doctrine requires intolerance.”
“Is there a point to any of this?” Cassie asked. “Why did you come back here?”
“I need the control room,” Gizan said. “To locate a way off this planet. I’m guessing your other friends will be along soon, so we don’t have much time.”
“Pull the trigger,” Cassie replied. “Find out what happens.”
“We’re both too smart for that, aren’t we?” Gizan scowled. “If I shoot you and you twitch, then I die. That’s what’s stayed your hand. Your kind seem like quite the war mongers if you don’t mind my saying. Absolute killers. You should’ve seen what your soldiers did to my men.”
“Yeah, quite the atrocity on account of your peaceful protest,” Cassie sneered, “you disgust me with your attempt to play this out like you’re some kind of victim. I recommend you move on. I’m not surrendering this control room and as you said, reinforcements are on the way.”
“Perhaps we can come to an agreement.” Gizan started to slide toward Cassie and she took a step back, her legs brushing against the computer console. “Allow me to scan the planet and we don’t have to conduct any violence at all. We both win at that point, don’t you think?”
“Counter offer,” Cassie said. “Put the gun down and I’ll ensure you get off this planet as a prisoner of the Pahxin. I’ll make sure you’re treated

fairly until you stand trial for all the crimes you've committed. I'm sure it'll take a while for them to figure them all out, so that should buy you some time. How's that sound?"

"Like we're at an impasse." Gizan lunged toward her. Cassie pulled the trigger. Blood burst from high on his shoulder but he didn't even wince, slapping her weapon aside before she could fire again. Spinning in place, Cassie brought the weapon back around and slammed it into his good shoulder, driving him toward the computer terminal. Again, she tried to aim the gun but Gizan threw his feet up and kicked it from her hands. The sling kept it attached to her shoulder but as it dropped down, the weight made her wince and fall back.

This gave Gizan an opportunity to regain his footing and he attacked again, throwing a blow toward her head.

Cassie ducked, jabbing toward his stomach. Gizan grabbed her wrist and spun her around, pressing her arm against her back. She leaned back, kicking the console to carry them both to the opposite side of the control platform. His back slammed into the metal and his grip loosened, just enough for her to get free.

Lifting her hands defensively, Cassie stepped back and glared into his eyes. The two remained motionless for a long moment.

"You disgusting animal!" Jayla's voice drew their attention to her. She was holding one of the sonic weapons, pointing it at Gizan. "You murdered Dak, you horrible piece of filth! I should kill you where you stand!"

"I doubt you have it in you," Gizan said. "If you do, pull the trigger, you trite little thing. Kill me if you can."

Jayla fired the weapon into the console near him, sending sparks into the air. Cassie winced away, lifting her own gun. The moment she went for it, Gizan hopped the console and rushed for the door. Bullets tapped the wall near him but he escaped, slipping into the base at an alarming rate.

"Are you okay?" Cassie asked Jayla. The woman nodded. "Good." She took a deep breath and turned her attention to Vine. Dropping down beside him, she noted he'd been hit in the shoulder. She used the suit's

external scanner to check him and found that he was alive though he'd been severely hurt by the attack.
The armor vibrated so violently, it seemed to shatter his shoulder and several ribs. If he hadn't been in the suit, he certainly would've died.
Heavy footfalls sounded from down the hall, opposite of where Gizan had fled. The marines would be there any second. Cassie didn't know what to do for Vine. He seemed stable and without taking off the armor, she couldn't apply first aid. It might be better to leave him in there until a doctor could help him anyway.
The marines burst into the room, weapons at the ready. Gillet approached Cassie, crouching beside her. "What the hell happen? We heard gunshots … is he … is he …"
"He's hurt," Cassie replied. "But not dead. He's been shot with one of those sonic weapons." She stood up. "We need to get him back to the ship right away."
"What about me?" Jayla squeaked. She'd been crying so hard, her voice was devastated. One of the marines disarmed her. "Please don't shoot!"
"Hold up." Cassie motioned for the marine to back off. "She's okay. She's coming with us."
Gillet pulled her aside. "Is that a good idea?"
"She's an independent contractor with Kalrawv. She doesn't have any loyalty to them." Cassie motioned around. "Does it look like they're coming to save her? We'll be putting her under guard when we get back to the ship. You realize she helped me get you guys the information you needed to get the Orb, right?"
Gillet cursed under his breath. "Move out, people. We have to get Vine back to the ship not to mention it would be great to leave this shit hole behind. Everyone ready?"
They made an indistinct noise amongst themselves and fell into action. Cassie helped Jayla to her feet, wincing at the pain in her shoulder. Gizan really wrenched her arm around when he grabbed her, and it felt like he'd at the very least strained the muscle. Ice should do the trick.
Marines picked up Vine and they all started for the hallway leading

back to the breach they'd entered from. Gillet led the way and Cassie happily let him. Providing the shuttle waited outside, they'd be back up and safely aboard the Gnosis. As much as she hadn't minded leaving the ship when necessary, this trip became stressful on a different level.

The threats had always been tertiary until the very end. Chance encounters remained possible but unlikely. Gizan attacking her gave the anxiety meaning, meant she wasn't simply being dramatic. As she listened to the whistling wind outside and rain pounded down on the windows, she realized how lucky she was to be alive.

And that made her both thankful … and afraid.

***

Gizan dashed down the hall at a full sprint. His shoulder burned from where he'd been shot, his back aching from when the little woman threw them against the panel. Looking at her did not give him any sense of danger, especially considering his size advantage.

Nevertheless, she held her own and even fired the weapon.

That surprised him the most.

Luck came to his aid, saving him from the worst of the damage but then he heard the distant clatter of her reinforcements and he had to go. Worse, he still didn't have an escape. It dawned on him he might be stuck there. Tol'An forces pulled out. Human and Pahxin secured what they cared about and would also be gone soon.

That left Kalrawv stragglers and civilians. Knowing the government, they would likely send aid for those people. Providing the Stalwart moved on, he may be able to join them and simply slip off the planet on his own. He looped around, heading down a flight of stairs then back toward the quarters he'd been assigned upon arrival.

Panicked civilians gathered around the kiosk Gizan started a fight at, each of them questioning what might happen next. He intermingled with them, even accepted aid from a particularly compassionate woman. She applied pressure to his wound and gave him some water.

No soldiers came into the area, no men in power armor or those

carrying weapons. People speculated around him about what might happen next. They discussed worries about Kalrawv's reactions to delays. The miners wanted to get paid but they didn't know if the funds would be released.

Some talked about legal action, others expressed they merely had a desire to get home. Gizan fueled the fires in that direction, stating his own desire to leave that place. Many things would change for him as he departed that planet and the civilians around him would be the catalyst.

The Tol'An no longer had his service. Gizan would allow them to believe he died during the operation, he would disappear. One obstacle stood in his way. The two women in the control room saw his face. They may have even had him on a camera. Getting around could be difficult if they were to circulate it, if they cared.

And after he nearly killed them both, they would very likely care.

One problem at a time, Gizan thought, waiting patiently for his rescue. They'll be dealt with in time.

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Epilogue

Cassie emerged from the shuttle after Heat and Vine were rolled out on stretchers. Medics immediately went to work on them, releasing the safety catches on their armor to get at them. Several others traveled under their own volition, but they followed along, needing various levels of aid.

Her arm hurt but she didn't think she needed to visit the doctors. Vincent rushed over to her and pulled her in a tight embrace, causing her to wince. He didn't notice, and she clung to him for a moment before drawing back.

"Sorry," Cassie muttered. "My arm … I'll … I'll tell you about it later."

Jayla was escorted off the ship by the pilots. She nodded to Cassie, mouthing thank you as she passed by. They were taking her to some quarters to get cleaned up and checked out by one of the medics. Cassie figured the Pahxin would take her from them, perhaps returning her to their home world.

"Are we going to be able to leave soon?" Cassie asked.

"There's some damage," Vincent replied, "but it won't take long. Engineering just gave us an estimate of three hours. The Stalwart's on the way here now. We're setting up a perimeter so they can conduct some repairs as well. Kalrawv might get here before we're gone so we have to be ready to bolt."

"I guess no one's in the mood for another fight, huh?" Cassie rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. Only then did she notice flecks of blood on her shirt sleeves. "Oh … wow."

"Whose is that?"

"I had to shoot someone." Cassie held up her hand to stop him from questioning her. "That's part of the later story. I guess the Orb must be here?"

Vincent nodded. "Secure in the lab we had the other two in. Guards are on it now. There's a lot going on up here." He looked around. "Several of our pilots were shot down. Dennis Arden's in the sick bay. He got banged up pretty bad. Lucky for him, nothing broken but he's

definitely down for the count for a week or so at the least."
"Vine and Heat both got hurt." Cassie shook her head. "Vine might be better off than Heat. Gillet explained on the way back to the ship how many times the man got shot. He's tough as hell but I think he'd do well to come back from a mission without getting blasted for once."
Vincent smirked but shook his head. "I'll talk to Fielding about instilling some caution in these guys."
"His recklessness might've been what prevented the Tol'An from getting away with the Orb."
"So we'll find a way to gently tell them to be careful." Vincent gestured with his head for her to follow him and they left the hangar. "I'm guessing you'd like to get cleaned up and have something to eat. How about we meet at the mess deck in thirty minutes? I'll buy you free coffee."
"That sounds nice," Cassie said. "Won't the captain want a report? A debriefing?"
"I convinced him we have plenty of time for that during the hyperspace jump." Vincent paused as they got into the hall. "What's the deal with the lady you brought back?"
"Civilian that helped me out. She's okay I think. Witnessed something pretty horrible." Cassie felt grubby. Running a hand through her hair made her sneer. "I'll see you soon. I've got to get this rain or whatever it is out of my hair."
"Take your time." Vincent gripped her good shoulder. "I'll be waiting."
Cassie returned to her quarters and sat at her desk, bringing up the video footage she took of the mission. Down in the mine shaft, when the Stalwart spoke to the imposter, she had a good image of him. Magnifying it, she confirmed it was the man she fought with in the control room.
He was still out there somewhere, and the authorities had to know. She made a copy and set it aside to be deployed with her report. He might've thought he got away, that he'd be able to disappear, but Cassie intended to prove him wrong. Eventually, Gizan would be caught and tried for his actions.

But he wasn't her concern about the moment. Stripping down, she looked at herself in the mirror, sucking air through her teeth when she saw the bruising around her shoulder. Getting cleaned up felt wonderful but once she calmed down, once the adrenaline completely wore off, she was sore all over.
A meal and a nap sounded like just the thing. Providing she'd be allowed to sleep, Cassie figured she'd be mostly recovered in a few hours. Heading to the mess hall, she intended to wind down and let the mission go. There would be time to relive it during her briefing.

***

Ulian acknowledged the damage report and turned his attention to Morala. She stood in front of his desk, in the privacy of his office but her posture was ramrod perfect. Eyes stared straight ahead, like a new recruit waiting for orders from her first instructor. He sensed her anxiety as she waited for his evaluation.
"Sit down, for goodness sake." Ulian shook his head as she complied. "We've worked together for far too long to have you acting like that around me. Don't you think?"
"My apologies. I'm nervous."
"You successfully completed the mission," Ulian replied. "Against disadvantageous odds even. What would you say would be the biggest failure of the operation?"
"Allowing the humans to take the facility," Morala said. "Doing so nearly cost us the primary objective."
Ulian nodded. It wasn't a bad answer. "But ultimately, they pulled it off."
"Yes, but we had no way of knowing that when the Tol'An pulled out."
"What do you think was your biggest failure during the mission?"
Morala sighed through her nose, brows furrowing. Clearly, she hadn't considered the question until that moment. "I suppose … I did not offer as much morale as I could've to our people. I should have given them more encouragement, less direct orders. I think I may have been

too abrupt in my manner."
"Reason?"
"I was too focused on the end result rather than the journey to get there."
Ulian smiled. "Insightful."
"What rating would you give me?"
"Highly successful," Ulian said. "Congratulations on a job well done. I'm glad that my faith in you was justified."
Morala seemed to relax all at once.
"Are you really so relieved? Did you honestly think I would feel differently?"
"I was concerned," Morala replied. "Because this was an important mission and in the midst of combat, orders are easy to second guess. It felt as if I could've made many mistakes. They seemed wise at the time … our people performed well. But the loss of life when it came to our pilots … I regret that."
"The fighter portion of our military needs to make some adjustments as to how they train them," Ulian said. "That's not necessarily on you or me. But I do understand how you feel. In any event, when we go into hyperspace, we can go through the entire battle together if you'd like some more detailed feedback."
"I would be honored."
"Excellent. Then I would request you to take charge of repairs while I confer with Captain Bradford. I believe he and I should discuss the next operation. We'd like to get that final Orb before dealing with the Tol'An and the sooner we begin, the sooner this conflict can end. Thank you for your time, Morala."
"You as well, sir."
Morala left him alone and he turned his attention to the port hole, staring outside. Space seemed peaceful now that the conflict ended. He looked forward to the time when they weren't hopping between conflicts, battling various enemies but even when the Tol'An were dealt with, there would always be more threats.
Ulian heard rumors of a pirate cartel starting trouble on the trade lanes and some of the old colonies were making noise about their

taxes. The military would have need of him for as long as he made himself available. He didn't regret his life, nor the events that honed him into a warrior, but he felt the beginning of exhaustion weighing on his soul.

It'll be time to get out soon, Ulian thought. But not just yet. Not until the Tol'An are gone and I feel my home is relatively safe. Then … maybe then, I can step away. Working with Morala gave him hope for the future. Bright officers like her represented a new generation of soldier for the Pahxin people. If he turned over the reins to her, he knew she'd do a good job.

***

Dala made her way through the Gnosis hangar but had to pause just outside. She had to ask for directions but finally found her way to the medical bay nearly twenty minutes later. There, she found the members of Mustang Squadron gathered around their leader. Approaching quietly, she half expected them to be mourning the man. Much to her relief, Dennis was sitting up, chatting animatedly about the battle. She smiled, but mastered her emotions, clearing her throat to announce her presence. All eyes fell on her and she lifted her hand in greeting. A couple of the pilots scowled but the one person that mattered returned the gesture.

"Hi Dala," Dennis said. "Thanks for coming to see me."

"I don't have long," Dala replied. "We're all going to hyperspace soon. I received clearance to ensure you were okay. In person. They wanted me to send a com call." She sighed. "My apologies, I don't mean to ramble. I'm … I'm quite pleased to see you up and speaking."

"Thanks to a little effort from the bomber crews." Dennis shrugged. "I wasn't out there long." He looked at the others. "Can we have a moment, guys?"

Dala got the sense they had some words for her, but they kept their opinions to themselves while pacing away. He motioned for her to come closer and she stepped up beside him, clasping his hand. Looking into his eyes, she tried to gauge how he felt, whether he blamed her or not for being shot down.

“We’re cool,” Dennis said. “Don’t worry about it. That kind of thing happens … pilots get shot down. And that was a rough mission.”
“I don’t know what cool means but … you are … certain?” Dala tilted her head. “I … I feel responsible. I’m sorry that I only brought the three of us.”
“Alicia was a good call. She told me what happened after I punched out. You guys did great.” Dennis shrugged. “And hey, overall objective was completed. We have the Orb and we’re on our way home. I’d call that a pretty big win.”
“We lost several …” Dala shook her head. “But not as many as in the past I suppose.” She let him go and straightened up. “I’m glad you’re not cross with me. I didn’t mean for this to happen. You mean something to me. Our time together has been pleasant, and I look forward to more.”
Dennis grinned. “If you don’t get off this ship soon, you might be spending a lot more time with me.” He motioned with his head toward to the door. “The light indicates we’re moving toward hyperspace soon.”
Dala’s eyes widened. “I should go then.” She paused, torn with indecision. Finally, she leaned over him and pressed her lips to his forehead. “Rest. We will see each other again when we are back on your planet where I can make this up to you properly. Until then … farewell, Dennis.”
She left the medical bay before he could respond, rushing back toward the hangar. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. The trip from the Stalwart to the Gnosis filled her with dread, terror at having lost his friendship, and whatever else might’ve been developing between them. He survived … and miraculously, so did their burgeoning relationship.
After everything else they were doing, all the fighting and rushing to finish off the Tol’An, the simplest of things gave Dala a reason to fight. Protecting her country, her friends and their new allies felt like worthy goals, the kind she willingly risked her life for. Having ensured her newest bond remained strong, a newfound confidence made her hopeful for the future.

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Anomaly: Legacy War Book 7

One final Orb remains at large in the wild and the Gnosis is dispatched to get it. Lost somewhere in a space station on the edge of civilized space, early intelligence reports suggested it would be a milk run…until a team of Pahxin technicians went missing there. Altering their mission parameters to include rescue, they load up an extra team of marines and head off on the mission.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, AIA operative Christina Dawson closes in on the traitor selling out humanity to the Tol'An. Her people have located an old military base currently occupied by the mercenary group responsible for attacking Gamma Alpha. She gathers a former marine and newly appointed AIA agent to investigate in person.

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Prologue

Screams echoed off the metal walls, hordes of people reduced to little more than animal instinct. They never seemed to stop, just when one person reached the limit of their lung capacity, another took their place with just as much wild zeal. Footsteps pounded the grated floors and the high pitch clang of hollow pipes competed with the cacophony.

Zahl Dray sat on the floor of the station control room, sweat threatening to drip into his eyes. Every part of his body shook, muscle tremors from fear and strain. He struggled to breathe, to stop himself from hyperventilating. If he passed out, he would die. That much remained certain in his mind.

He brandished his sidearm, holding it in both hands. It swayed in front of him, blurring before his eyes as he stared at the only door leading into the room. He'd lost his rifle somewhere in the hallway, at least a hundred yards from where he sat. Something startled him as he ran and his hand twitched, letting the weapon fall.

A fleeting thought warned him to pick it up but before he even considered it, he was a good ten paces away. If his crew pursued him, if his former friends remained close behind, he would've been caught. The weapon would not have helped. So he was relegated to a pistol carrying eight shots.

Eight measly rounds stood between him and a gruesome murder. Much as he wanted to cling to hope, to believe he might escape his situation, his heart began to accept his fate. There were dozens of them out there, friends turned to savages and nothing seemed to scare them, not pain, not mutilation . . . not even death.

When they came for him, and they would soon, the first one through the door wouldn't even think twice about the weapon in his hand, the threat of being shot in the face. They'd die, and the person behind them would do the exact same thing. If he proved to have incredible aim, if he pulled off eight headshots, the ninth, tenth and eleventh would've torn him apart.

Zahl saw it happen to some of his colleagues before they fell prey to whatever afflicted the previous occupants. Scans indicated a tech crew from the Pahxin government, noncombatants sent to recover the station and bring it back online. Zahl's captain called them easy pickings, a quick payday.

He thought back to the moment without screams, without murder and violent death. They arrived in the system, down on their luck from two failed jobs. Hitting the station was supposed to be an easy score. Even if it had been abandoned, they could scrap the consoles, take the metal and push it off on prospectors.

When they arrived, they were surprised to find a perfectly intact and functional starship docked there. It was lightly armed, marked as one of the Pahxin government recovery units. They were essentially civilians, men and women putting their lives on the line to do humanitarian work.

Yet, Zahl's captain fully intended to take their ship and strand them there. They'd get help eventually but that score . . . A government ship would set them up for a long time. It would more than make up for the past failures, their bad luck. All they had to do was dock and make it happen.

Zahl pulled out his tablet, marveling at the fact it survived the encounter. He engaged the recorder. He figured he didn't have much time, so he wanted to put it to good use. Maybe the next people who showed up could be spared what he experienced. If he told his story, if they found it before they too were killed, then just maybe he'd die having done something right.

"My name is Zahl Dray, and I'm a pirate." He kept his voice down, speaking softly though it probably didn't matter. Those who were after him changed when their blood was up. They stopped listening, stopped speaking. The hunt and the kill became all they cared about. "Everyone needs to know what happened to my crew."

Another scream interrupted him. He closed his eyes and continued to speak. "Before I go on, take this recording and leave. Do not come here. Whatever has happened, you want no part of it. I can't even say whether I'm lucky to be alive or not. As I wait here to die, I'm

thinking back on the moment we figured out how much trouble we were in."

***

Earlier

Zahl didn't want to go to the station. He would've preferred to remain onboard the ship running diagnostics. Considering how little he knew about the mechanics of their vessel, that said a great deal. Unfortunately, the captain considered him one of the better shots among the crew.

Great to be good, I guess. Zahl took up the rear while his companions took the lead. He turned to watch the airlock doors close, wondering how long it would be before they returned. While the captain convinced them all it would be an easy job, there was a complication: scans didn't show how many life signs were aboard.

That seemed like a good indication they should do some more recon. But their ship wasn't exactly outfitted with the best equipment. As long as they found valuables, they usually didn't care about anything else. Such reckless behavior worked in normal circumstances when the situation was straightforward.

But in the face of the unknown, something the pirates rarely dealt with, it became extremely dangerous. After all, they had limited resources. Even food was a luxury at times. Zahl understood their desperation this time but he would've preferred an easy raid to some poorly guarded colony.

Then at least we'd know the odds. Those colonists wouldn't stand a chance. Neither would the technicians. When they found them.

Five of them boarded the station. Captain Rand took point. Behind him, Vorn and Qil were there to pilot their stolen vessel. Zahl and Xord were there as muscle in the unlikely event the techs had guns . . . or put up a fight at all. Chances were good they wouldn't be needed and yet, Zahl couldn't shake his nerves.

The station in question didn't register on their database. That didn't

mean too much considering how long it had been since they received a proper update, but Rand seemed to think it was special. The government may have set it up to do some kind of secret research but Vorn suggested it might not have been of Pahxin design.
“What’re you saying?” Zahl asked. “That this place was built by aliens? Come on.”
“It’s close,” Vorn replied, “but there’s something weird about the walls. They’re just . . . I don’t know . . . off.”
The tech ship they planned to steal was on the opposite side of where they docked. They had few choices of where to enter. Some parts of the station didn’t even have oxygen due to hull damage. That meant a good trek through the place. Zahl felt leery of his surroundings at first but after five empty modules, he dropped his guard.
“Anything on scans yet?” Rand asked.
“Negative,” Vorn replied. “I can’t even get through the doors as we approach them. I thought it was just proximity when we were on the ship but now, I’m suspecting interference. Someone’s intentionally jamming us maybe. Or the power core in this place is emanating so much radiation, we can’t get through it. Either way, this is weird.”
“We know which way we’re going, right?” Xord asked. “We’re going the right way?”
“Yes,” Rand said. “Don’t worry about that. Can we raise the ship?”
“Communications remain unaffected.” Vorn sighed. “How would this *only* impact scans?”
“We can ask the techies,” Xord said. “When we find them.”
“Just before we strand them here,” Rand replied. “Though even I’m starting to think that might be a little harsh.”
“This place is eerie,” Qil added. “I thought it might’ve just been stripped down but I’m getting another feeling now. You think something happened? Something tragic?”
“Maybe,” Rand said, “but who cares? That had to be a long time ago. I don’t hear weapons fire and no one’s even around. I’m pretty sure we’re in the clear. Hell, maybe we’ll get lucky and the tech crew will have already died out here. As long as we hurry and don’t get caught up in this drama, we’ll be perfectly fine.”

The next module put them seven away from the ship they were after. Zahl checked his chronometer. They'd been onboard the station for less than half an hour but it felt longer. Even his stomach complained, acting like he hadn't eaten in days. He looked at the others, checking their expressions.

None of them showed outward signs of agitation. Zahl wondered if he was the only one feeling off. He thought to ask but Xord would've just given him a hard time. Something could've been off with the oxygen. They weren't wearing any protection because Vorn made it clear they were perfectly safe.

Zahl ran his own scan of their environment but there didn't seem to be anything off about it. He chalked it up to the unnerving quiet in the place. A power generator should've caused deck vibration, some kind of resonance but there was nothing at all. Their footsteps made the only sound and they echoed eerily down the halls.

"You know, we might be walking into an ambush," Zahl said. "Anyone on this thing can hear us coming."

"That's a good point," Rand said. "Let's slow this down. Xord, you get up here. Take point. Shoot anything that moves. We don't need to let anyone live through this."

Before Xord could make it, someone shouted to their left, a husky cry that seemed to come from the person's gut. It was answered by another directly in front of them, maybe two modules away. Rand turned, seemingly in slow motion. He was on the verge of saying something when the telltale buzz of beam weapons cut him off.

"Retreat!" Rand shouted. "God knows how many there are!"

They started running, heading back toward the ship. Heavy footfalls sounded behind them, dozens of people falling into pursuit. Xord fired behind him a couple times but Zahl had no idea what he might be aiming for. There was no sign of anyone, no indication of what they were dealing with.

Rand got on the com. "We need reinforcements!" He shouted. "Get off the ship and into position! We're leading them back to your position now!"

Vorn fell down. No one bothered to help him. Zahl glanced back,

watching the man struggle to rise. Hands grabbed his legs, coming out of the shadows. They dragged him off and he cried out, screaming for aid. Zahl kept running. The thought of helping his fellow crew member didn't even cross his mind. Blind fear pushed him on.

The com lit up. Their reinforcements had boarded the station and were ready for action. "Good!" Rand shouted. "We're going to take this place by force if that's what they want."

More beam weapons cut through the air. Xord dropped to the ground. A glance showed that he'd taken a blast straight to the head. He died instantly. But there were plenty of pirates just down the hall, forty men who could back them up providing they arrived before being slaughtered themselves.

Zahl fired backward several times, hoping it would slow down their pursuers. All his negative feelings, his worry, and fear caught up to him. He'd been right. The gut feeling telling him something was off had been right. If they survived, he'd pull an *I told you so* to Rand but until then, all he wanted to do was live.

Another look afforded him a good view of their attackers. The first two he saw wore metal plates on their chests. Torn pants offered a minimal amount of modesty. Their heads were all shaved and some of their faces were smeared with blood. Bulging muscles made it clear these were *not* government technicians.

What the hell did we stumble on? Zahl shot one in the face, dropping him to the ground. The man's companions hopped over the body, continuing their pursuit. Not one of them even spared their fallen a glance. Their dedication to pursuit overwhelmed their compassion for one of their own. *This is insane!*

Suddenly, the extra manpower they were rushing toward didn't seem like such a dramatic advantage. Zahl only hoped the firing line would prove enough to tear through these wild men. They were like barbarians out of some distant past, a cadre of maniacs bent on murder and mayhem.

At least the pirates only wanted money. Killing was secondary, and only when their targets resisted. These people didn't even put out a warning. They immediately escalated to deadly force and they weren't

slowing down.
“We’re almost there!” Rand cried. “Push yourselves, men! When you see our people, hit the deck to clear their line of fire! We’ll crawl the rest of the way!”
Zahl ran until his chest felt like it might burst. He threw himself through the air, his elbows and knees slamming into the grated deck. Pain lanced through him but he ignored it, crawling forward. Their people started shooting. More screams filled the air. It became obvious they’d be hearing that for a while.
The survival of Zahl and his crew rested firmly on their ability to drive back the marauders charging their position. The battle begun, the stakes had never been higher and as the gunfire intensified, it became clear many of them would never make it off that station. Whatever malady befell the station had claimed the pirates as well.

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Chapter 1

Captain Desmond Bradford stepped off the elevator onto the bridge of the Gnosis, pausing to take in the scene. After their last mission, he wanted to give Lieutenant Deacon Neville a chance to return them to Earth, providing some much-needed experience with hyperspace. Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan stood nearby, observing nervously.

"Relax," Desmond said as he took his seat. "I'm sure Deacon's spent plenty of time studying the workings of our helm. What're the chances of him blowing us up?"

Lieutenant Salina Gold turned from her station to answer. "Roughly sixty-three percent." They all turned eyes on her. "What? Oh, my figures come from relative inexperience combined with damage received during the mission and the random chance that we've discovered when speaking with the Pahxin about the process in general."

"Still sounds a little high," Zach said.

"Well." Salina shrugged. "Perhaps. Consider it an estimate."

"I'll consider it unnecessary," Desmond said. "If you have hard data to back that up, please keep it to yourself. I'm not interested."

"Nor me!" Deacon added. "Oh, we're getting close. Ten minutes maximum."

"Excellent." Desmond turned to his own computer, looking for a report on other personnel. Commander Vincent Bowman dropped him a line stating he was in engineering and would be on the bridge just before they emerged from hyperspace. Apparently, he was assisting Agent Cassandra Alexander and Chief Nathaniel Webber with an experiment.

Desmond checked the log to see what they were up to. It involved shield calibration on a theoretical level, computer simulations to cycle their defenses swiftly enough to counter attacks efficiently. They'd all been talking about it, but someone must've had an epiphany. The test had been going on for the better part of two hours.

The Orb they recovered remained locked up, off limits to all but senior staff. Much as it aided them to mess with the one they had before, Desmond didn't feel like taking any risks with staff while they returned this time. There was still one more out there that they knew of and he preferred to go after the sure thing rather than perform experiments.

Especially considering the one they just found had been hidden underground for an indeterminate period of time. Their own had been in the same boat and it took them some time to unlock its secrets. More importantly, this new one might not be fully functional. Attempting to tap into it without controlled conditions could be catastrophic.

They already knew the Orbs held incredible power, easily enough to destroy the Gnosis with the wrong move.

I'm probably just being paranoid, but this trip isn't long enough to pull meaningful data anyway. Besides, they had their mission ahead of them. Get the final Orb and take care of the Tol'An. Simple, clean and above all, direct. Desmond had to admit, though he signed up for exploration and science, he had been a soldier for far longer.

That wasn't to say he wanted war. He'd had enough action with the conflicts on Earth. Turning to space seemed like a quiet getaway by comparison. But when the Tol'An attacked the first time, he knew nothing would be the same again. As they encountered more of the galactic players, the universe both grew and shrunk.

Their first forays into space came at a time they thought imagined being alone. As bleak as the thought might've been, it just might've been true. No contact from any alien race in so much time then, just as they take to the stars, they were attacked. The coincidence was not lost on Desmond.

Some talked about destiny, a sense of fate driving such factors. Others suggested the activity above their planet attracted notice. Had they not taken to the stars, perhaps the Tol'An never would've found the Orb in the first place. That seemed doubtful but possible. Was the device hiding itself until the people who held it might defend it? Maybe. So much about the devices remained unknown, even to the

Pahxin. They had theirs for far longer, studying it with dozens if not hundreds of experts. Still, they found themselves unable to explain a great deal about it. Desmond found that fascinating, but another theory made the most sense to him.

Thayne Ridala, a Pahxin scientist the Gnosis saved on their first mission, suggested that the Orb unlocked information as the race controlling it became 'worthy' of the information. In other words, it held back until the people holding it would understand the knowledge they were about to possess.

"Two minutes," Deacon announced. "Be there soon, sir."

The elevator opened. Vincent stepped in, taking his seat. "Almost missed it," he muttered. "Sorry about that. They needed help with the combat simulation part of their little experiment."

"Did it seem like it'll help?"

"We'll know when they've analyzed the data." Vincent shrugged. "Looked like a lot of math to me, the kind I couldn't interpret."

Desmond smirked. "I can't wait to see the report for it. That'll be fun."

"Thirty seconds." Deacon finally sounded nervous. Simulations could do only so much when it came to preparing for the real thing. He performed the countdown, hands poised on the controls. Tapping at the last two points, the ship vibrated for a brief moment before emerging from hyperspace. "Done!"

Desmond chuckled. "Position?"

Salina answered, "right on target, sir. Perfect re-entry. Four hours to Earth orbit."

"Fantastic job, my friend," Desmond said. "Well done."

"I knew you could do it," Zach added.

"I'm not sure that's true," Deacon replied, "but I appreciate it just the same! Course heading, sir?"

"Get us home, Lieutenant." Desmond stood. "I'll be in my quarters, reporting in to Admiral Reach. Vincent, you have the bridge." He boarded the elevator just as Cassie was coming out. They nearly collided. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine." Cassie cleared her throat and moved past him. "Going for the briefing?"

“Indeed,” Desmond replied. “Try not to blow anything up while I’m gone, huh?”
“I’ll do my best.”
The doors closed and Desmond turned to his tablet, checking the time on Earth. It should’ve been around four in the morning at Gamma Alpha. Admiral Reach may have been awake but he kind of doubted it. Depending on the days they were running, he’d probably be waking the man up shortly.
Back in his office, he sent the call and turned his chair, staring out the window at open space. The peace lasted less than two minutes before the com connected. Desmond turned to his screen, surprised to see Christina Dawson looking at him. He didn’t think she acted as the Admiral’s aide anymore after her allegiance to Intelligence came out. Yet she’d taken his call.
“Good morning, Captain,” Christina said. “I’m glad to see you made it back in one piece. I’m hoping you’ve got some fantastic news for us.”
“I have the Orb,” Desmond replied. “I was contacting the admiral to give him a quick briefing. Is he not available?”
“Emergency meeting,” Christina replied. “With Dulain. It’s part of the investigation into the attack on Gamma Alpha. We’ve got some leads and need some military support to follow them. Hence the chat with the admiral.”
“Understood. I’m thinking when we arrive, we should do our best to get the Orb down there with the minimal amount of fuss. Maybe even send a couple shuttles to collect resources to establish a cadence. When the Orb gets there, security forces can show up at that point and escort it in.”
“Gamma Alpha is already under heavy lockdown,” Christina said. “We’ve got more soldiers here than some military bases, I swear. That’s an exaggeration but only barely. There’s also plenty of air support. Bring the Orb down in the first shuttle. I guarantee it’s going to land without incident.”
“Alright, that sounds good.” Desmond stood. “I’m going to organize the movement of the device and get everything ready up here. We’ll be in touch when we’re closer. Oh . . . can you please have Admiral

Reach contact me as soon as he's available? I'd like to give him some details of what we experienced out there."
"I'll be sure to put it on his calendar as soon as he's done with Dulain," Christina said. "Dawson out."
Desmond leaned back in his chair, scowling at the screen for a moment. He didn't entirely trust the intelligence division, but he knew his commanding officer needed to be more open minded. To be fair, Dulain proved to be extremely helpful when he was on board the Gnosis assisting them.
Perhaps they chose to become more of an open book. Desmond had heard they were working with Pahxin intelligence, which meant they were branching out. Their own level of paranoia wasn't standing in the way of getting work done. That was a change of pace, and it would likely benefit all parties.
Desmond tapped the com, connecting with Bowman. "Vincent, we have to get the Orb ready for departure. They've locked down Gamma Alpha hard, so we should have no trouble getting it there and stored. I'd like you to coordinate with the technicians and have them move it right away."
"Understood," Vincent replied, "anything special about it? You want marines on the shuttle with it?"
"I think that would be a good idea. Put the men on there who need some downtime. They can take shore leave as soon as they arrive and the device is locked up. Make sure Heathrow's part of that crew, will you? He definitely needs a break. Maybe even some extended time off on the planet."
"I'll talk to Fielding about it too. I'll talk to you later."
Desmond clicked off the com, glancing at his bed. He had a few hours to kill and nothing specific he needed to do. A quick nap would do him some good. He changed his status to downtime to ensure he only would be disturbed for absolute emergencies and settled in for a little rest.
When they arrived on Earth, he'd be pulled a million directions, by the doctors and administration staff. While it would be nice to sleep without a low-level vibration each evening, he knew there'd be plenty

of stress to make such evenings far from comfortable. Their next action involved securing a distinct advantage against the Tol'An. No one would be interested in remaining calm in light of that promised outcome.

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Christina waited for Dulain outside the meeting room. The moment the door opened, she slipped in. Military people departed the room, field commanders mostly. They'd been called upon to protect Gamma Alpha in the event of another attack but the opportunity for retaliation might be close at hand.

Getting them involved seemed premature considering the small amount of data Christina and her people managed to pull thus far. Even the prisoners seemed conditioned against traditional and enhanced interrogation techniques. More time was needed before they should muster any sort of attack force.

Reach and Dulain looked up at her as she closed the door. "Good morning, gentlemen," she said. "I've come with some information that both of you might be excited to hear. The Gnosis has returned, and she's got the Orb with her."

"Thank God." Reach let out a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear it. How bad was it?"

"I'm not sure," Christina replied. "Desmond stated he'll tell you about the operation when he gets some face to face time. He was pretty surprised to see me answering your private com. In any event, may I ask what this meeting pertained to? I hope my assumptions are wrong."

Dulain fielded the question, "we're putting the military on alert status so they can be ready at a moment's notice. When you confirm our target, they need to be on hand to crash down upon them. It's no different than how we handled that incident in Sydney, remember? The hostage situation?"

"Improper intel," Christina explained, "could lead to a serious problem. I want to confirm anything before we turn the dogs of war

loose. Do we all agree upon that at the very least?"
"Of course," Reach said. "But we do need to be prepared. These people hit us without a moment's notice. That was pretty incredible considering our security. My superiors are determined to make sure that doesn't happen again not just with defenses, but in offense as well. Whoever is doing this has to be made combat ineffective as soon as possible."
Dulain added, "Admiral, I think you have another appointment now, don't you? I'd like to have a word with Christina about the investigation in private."
"Of course." Reach stood. "Thank you both for your efforts. We'll catch up later, Dulain."
Christina watched the admiral leave before glaring at Dulain. "What exactly are you up to with him?"
"We've developed a stronger relationship now that we've had threats coming out of the woodwork. He's more receptive to my advice than ever before and all it really took was being honest. Who would've thought that?" Dulain shrugged. "And I thought for sure when he discovered you, things would step back."
"No, he can't hold a grudge for long," Christina replied. "But this military thing makes me nervous, Dulain. We're having a hard time tracking down clues on this. Operatives are pouring over data but none of it's panning out. I need more time . . . which I won't have if a bunch of military guys rattle their sabers."
"Don't worry about them," Dulain said. "They needed some assurance that they'll be involved when we take down the enemy. I'm pretty sure you and I have no interest in kicking down a door, so I figure they should hear it straight from me. We will allow them to conduct the operation when we have the intelligence to warrant it."
"And you're sure that's all you said?"
"I let them know it's our top priority as well." Dulain shrugged. "They might've read into that but none of them said so. I made no promises as to when they'd be able to take the fight to the streets as it were."
"Okay. Do you have any ideas?"
"What do we have right now?"

“One of the tech crews here caught a signal directed at some old base in Eastern Europe. Marines from Gamma Alpha took it out just before the Gnosis hyperdrive experiment. We ran a scan from satellites but didn’t turn anything up but there might be activity there, even if we’re not seeing it.”

“Chances that’s true?”

Christina shrugged. “If they’re somehow involved with the Tol’An? Good. They might have the technology to do it. But I don’t personally think they’re directly related to the enemy. Or at least, not in contact with them. I think they’ve been given coordinates to send things but that they have a different contact. A Pahxin likely.”

“Scary, but plausible.” Dulain hummed. “I think we need to get you out there.”

“Get me out there?” Christina shook her head. “I’m the lead on this case, not the field operative.”

“You’re the best person we have for this type of thing right now,” Dulain said. “Don’t go alone, of course, but get out there and do some recon. If you find that there is activity, give the military their attack. It’ll be the first, I’m sure because that won’t be the whole story. At least, I doubt it will.”

“I hate Eastern Europe,” Christina muttered. “It’s cold as hell over there this time of year.”

“And that base you’re referring to is in the mountains if I’m not mistaken,” Dulain pointed out. “Definitely going to be an uncomfortable experience. Just make it quick. If you’re fast, you’ll be in and out of there before you know it. If it’s empty, then maybe there’s some residual evidence, something leading us to the next clue.”

“I know how it works.” Christina sighed. “Alright, I’ll prep for the op right now. I told Bradford to bring the Orb down in their first shuttle. He’ll coordinate with security when he arrives I’m sure.”

“Thanks. The sooner it’s locked up the better.” Dulain stood. “We’ll talk when you get back. Be safe out there and don’t do anything too crazy. I can’t afford to lose you.”

“That might just be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me,” Christina replied. “I feel like I should . . . ask for a raise or something.”

Dulain grinned. “I *might* afford to lose you at that point.”
“Hilarious.” Christina chuckled. “Okay. Bye for now.” She left, heading down to her quarters. Along the way, she checked the various agents on staff, trying to find the right fit for the upcoming mission. She wanted experience but most of the field operatives at Gamma Alpha were relatively new.
She’d need to pick someone a touch on the green side. Providing they had a decent training record, she could work with it. For most of them, it would only be their second or third time out. *At least they won’t be going alone*, Christina thought. *That’ll help. Well, fortune favors the bold . . . and the expendable. Time to give someone the bad news about how cold they’ll be.*

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Cassie contacted Salina from engineering, sending her the figures from their shield tests. She needed someone to double check their work, to confirm their findings. It wouldn’t take long. Hopefully, they’d have the full results before arriving on Earth. Webber wanted to present them to Doctor Harper.
“Hi, Cassie,” Salina said. “How’s it going down there?”
“We’ve wrapped up our tests,” Cassie replied. “I’ve sent you the results. Can you please double check them?”
“No problem.” Salina paused. “Yep, they’re here. So hey . . . are you standing in private?”
“Yes,” Cassie paced out of earshot from the nearby technicians. “Webber’s in his office. What’s up?”
“We’ve been so busy, I haven’t had a chance to ask you.” Salina lowered her voice to a whisper. “How’re things between you and Commander Bowman?”
Cassie’s cheeks burned. “I’m . . . probably not at liberty to discuss that.”
“So we should have lunch while we’re waiting for the next op? If I want to hear about it that is.”
“You never struck me as being interested,” Cassie replied. Indeed,

Salina didn't really get overly emotional on the bridge. Even when they were working together, she always remained neutral. The fact she wanted to know about a potential romance going on seemed especially shocking.

"Well, I am. And I'd love to hear more. I'll buy?"

Cassie chuckled. "Okay, okay. When we're in orbit and things are settled, I'll happily do the lunch thing with you."

"Perfect!" Salina cleared her throat. "I've got one more personal question then I'll leave you alone, I promise."

Cassie smirked. "Go ahead."

"How're you feeling? You went down for that op . . . fought that guy . . . you've been inside the Orb. It makes me tired thinking about your adventures."

"I'm good," Cassie replied. "Though I have a bad feeling that when we arrive back on Earth, I'm going to be waylaid by Doctor Harper. I understand she tried to keep me from going on the last mission. She thought that after my contact with the Orb, I should've stayed on Earth under observation."

"What about Geoff?"

Salina was talking about Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow. He'd also been involved with the Orb but he went on the operation and descended to the planet as well. He and his unit fought there, taking out both Kalrawv soldiers and Tol'An. It was an intense bunch of fighting and didn't seem to be any worse the wear.

Aside from injuries sustained in battle at least.

"I don't know," Cassie said. "I'm sure she pushed for him to stick around too. Gil did but that was so he could work on the interface device. She's just trying to look out for us. There weren't research opportunities in us staying. But honestly, I felt fine and *needed* to be on that operation. It was important."

"I was glad to have you along. Thanks for the chat, Cassie. I'll check your figures right away."

"Thanks." Cassie cut the connection, heading over to Webber's office. "I'm heading up to my quarters. Salina's got the figures and will check them now."

“Appreciate it,” Webber called over his shoulder. “I probably won’t see you until we’re on planet so have a safe trip when you head down.”

“You too.”

Cassie made her way through the ship and into her room, flopping on the bed. While she claimed to feel fine, there were side effects she didn’t want to talk about. Sleep came differently for her than it had prior to interfacing with the Orb. It was like some of the connection, the information itself, lingered, impacting her rest.

She woke refreshed, but far more than ever before in her life, she experienced fantastically vivid dreams. Some were frightening, other inspirational but each felt as if she lived in those made up worlds. They reminded her of the vision she had when they first traveled back to Earth with an Orb in their possession.

How different is my mind now that I’ve been around these things for so long? The question had been bothering her for a while. Had she been altered by the Orb or simply fixating on the alien nature of the connection? She couldn’t say for sure and the doctors claimed there was no *physical* ramification from her time with the devices.

That led her to ask a harder question. Had the Orbs altered her consciousness? Modified some intangible part of her? Even thinking it made Cassie feel like she was indulging a fantasy, a concept far removed from any provable science. *For now*. That thought gave her chills.

They already knew the Orbs held on to advancements they could only dream of. The interface method alone suggested heightened psychic abilities. If one were to believe in that, then one would have to believe in possibilities. And were they endless? As far as humanity was concerned just then, yes.

Whether or not that meant Cassie would understand exactly what happened to her within her lifetime was another story entirely. The key focus for their research involved gathering as much data from the Orbs as possible for defense and offense against their opponents. Secondarily, they needed to worry about what caused the extinction of the race of beings who created the Orbs in the first place.

If they're even dead. One theory dancing about was that they may have elevated themselves to some other form of life, much like a previous mission where another race did so. They copied themselves into computers but what marvels could be? What could they have done to themselves?

There was some evidence of a plague, something that drove technology mad. A horrifying computer virus, one that humanity and the Pahxin both had to worry about returning. Without a sample of the data, they couldn't protect themselves, not entirely, but it seemed likely it was gone, never to return.

Of course, that might be wishful thinking. The horrors Cassie witnessed in her first vision haunted her to that day. She woke with a start in her bed, nearly falling to the floor. Someone was buzzing her door and that's what snatched her from sleep, pulling her out of what promised to become a second look at the darkness that befell that culture.

Cassie stood, frowning at the sweat making her shirt cling to her back and chest. Her hair was soaked but the buzz happened again. She would've rather avoided being seen bedraggled but it probably didn't matter. No one reported to her so she didn't necessarily have to put on a solid front at all times.

She opened the door. Vincent was standing there. His smile faded when he saw her. "Hey," he touched her arm, "are you okay?"

Cassie nodded. "Yeah, I'm good. I was just sleeping."

"More bad dreams?"

"It took a turn for the worst," Cassie replied, "but you woke me up before it could really get going."

"I've got good timing them." Vincent stepped inside. He tried to pull her close but she resisted.

"I'm disgusting, Vincent." Cassie stood back and looked down at herself. "Seriously, I don't even get how this happened. Anyway, I need to get cleaned up before we get there . . . Unless we're already home?"

"We'll take orbit in a half hour," Vincent replied. "So we've got time. I thought you might be hungry."

Even him saying that made her stomach growl. “I guess I am. I’ll meet you in the cafeteria in a few minutes, huh? I just want to wash up and change.”

“Sounds good.” Vincent paused at the door. “You don’t want some help with that whole cleaning thing, do you?”

Cassie laughed but waved her hand at him. “Get out of here, you maniac. We don’t have time if we want to eat before having to head down. I’ll talk to you in a few minutes.”

He left and she went about preparing for the rest of her day. After a quick shower, she brushed through her short hair, staring into the mirror. Vincent proved to be the best thing that happened to her since she joined the Gnosis. Career advancement aside, she felt like the two of them genuinely came away with something special.

Cassie smiled at the thought. It felt nice to think of something besides galactic affairs, ancient civilizations and the impact super technology had on the common person. Considering the romantic part of her life, putting some of that into perspective, gave her hope. If they were fighting for anything, it was the right to be people, regardless of the world around them.

That’s why she boarded the Gnosis and why she willingly took personal risks on their missions.

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Chapter 2

Cassie approached Doctor Harper's lab, preparing herself for a potential tongue lashing. The scientist vehemently fought against Cassie's participation in the last mission and lost. How much that would impact her attitude remained to be seen. She tended to be all business but when emotions got involved, logic went out the window.
"Wait up!" Desmond's voice caught her off guard. Cassie glanced back at him as he ran to catch up. "You get summoned to the lair of the mad scientist too, huh?"
Cassie shrugged. "I guess so. Probably to see what Gil came up with while we were gone. Thayne's in there too. Maybe we can access the inner workings of the Orbs without having to risk a mental meltdown, huh?"
"That would be nice," Desmond said. They started walking together. "This shouldn't take too long. I've got a briefing with Reach about what we just did and what we're about to do. Gnosis repairs are almost complete. We need to refuel and we're out of here. I'd say we're pretty close to settling this affair for good."
"We're just going alone this time, right?" Cassie asked. "The Stalwart isn't joining us?"
"It's an abandoned station in the middle of nowhere," Desmond said. "And before you give me that look, I know. If it was that easy, how's the Orb not been found already, right? Intelligence suggests that no one's been out there for a long time. Pahxin cataloged it as some failed experiment from an ancient civilization."
"And no one's been out there?"
Desmond shrugged. "They can't really know that one way or another, I'm sure. But during the briefing, we'll hear from their intel people. We can put some questions to them then. You're welcome to come if you'd like."
Cassie lifted her brows. "I thought that was military and officers only?"
"Dulain will be there. I figure if your boss can sit in, so can you.

Senior agent and all that."
"I'd like to hear the plan, sure. Especially if there's more information about the area. I might be of some help." Cassie paused before the door, putting her hand on his arm. "When we get this Orb, when we bring them all together . . . do you really think we're going to find the Tol'An? And if we do, what's the plan? Attack? Or let the Pahxin do it?"
"I don't know about you," Desmond replied, "but I fully intend to see this through."
Cassie nodded. "It would be a shame to let them wrap it up after all we've done but . . . on the flip side . . . we don't exactly have a military vessel."
"You guys are working on the shields. The weapons. When the time comes, we'll be able to participate. Trust me." Desmond gestured for the door. "Shall we? Doctor Harper might not complain about your participation in the mission now, but if we're tardy, it might give her enough fire to bring it all up."
"Fair point." Cassie tapped the panel to open the door and strode in. Technicians bustled about, shouting at each other over the beeps from computers and grinding power tools. Gil, Thayne, and Harper stood at a table in the center of the room, deep in a conversation. "Then again, she probably wouldn't have even noticed."
Gil held a metal box and he gestured at it firmly several times while speaking. The other two nodded as if their heads were on springs, each wearing a stern expression. Cassie turned to Desmond and shrugged. They advanced together to interrupt the confab to get their own meeting started.
"Hey there," Desmond said. His voice made Gil stop in the middle of a sentence. "Sorry, we were supposed to meet you here for a briefing?"
Harper snapped her fingers. "I nearly forgot! Thank you for coming. Please, join us. Gil was just explaining the structure of the device we're building to interface with the Orbs. It's a marvel. Absolute genius and we didn't even have to find a new material to make it work. We're making great things happen here, Captain. Absolutely great."

“Glad to hear it,” Desmond replied. “I believe Webber sent down some figures about our shields and some other things. Have you been able to look at those? Is the new Orb nestled up next to its buddies? How’re we doing?”

“We received the figures,” Thayne said, “and I ran some preliminary tests. They look good. I think we can make the modifications he’s talking about. I’ve got the computer testing it right now just to be sure we don’t cause any serious problems . . . like the destruction of the module or all the generators.”

“That would be bad,” Cassie agreed. “What’s the deal with this device? How long before it’s done?”

Gil spoke up, “I’m still working on the case for it. While it may not initially be big enough, I wanted to know that we could create something capable of containing the energy required and still able to be handled by one of us. You see, it may produce a tremendous amount of radiation and, as you know, that would be bad.”

“Indeed,” Desmond replied. “Okay, so we’re getting closer on that. The Orbs are all good. Shields might be upgraded before we leave. All this sounds great. Was there something else we need to talk about?”

Thayne said, “you are going to that outpost in the middle of nowhere, right?”

Desmond nodded. “That’s the plan.”

“I believe Gil was hoping to go on that mission and see it for himself.”

“Isn’t he working on this device?” Cassie asked.

“I am,” Gil replied, “but Thayne can take over for me. This is a chance to see something truly unique, a structure left behind by a culture no one really knows about. At least, we didn’t know about it until recently.”

Desmond quirked a brow. “What does that mean?”

“I assume you haven’t been to a briefing yet,” Gil replied, “but apparently, the Pahxin government found out about the place a week or so back. They sent technicians to bring it online. They thought it would make a good research facility. Perhaps even a beacon to help locate criminals and enemies.”

“Great.” Desmond sighed. “We thought we were going to an

abandoned facility."
"What's wrong?" Cassie asked. "If the Pahxin government knew about it, doesn't that mean they probably already have the Orb?"
Desmond shook his head. "Maybe but doubtful or they would've said so. More importantly though, if they found it, that means other people probably have too. That includes folks like the Tol'An . . . Kalrawv . . . pirates. God knows who else. We could be going into a real shit show if you'll excuse the vulgarity."
"The shields will be important then," Thayne added.
"And I will go with you?" Gil asked. "I want to see the base first hand."
"Yeah, you can come along if no one objects."
Harper grunted. "I seem to recall *my* objections didn't mean much when I pushed to have Agent Alexander remain behind last time."
"Sorry about that," Cassie muttered.
"Anyway," Desmond said. "We weren't trying to shut you out, Doctor Harper. But Cassie was needed on that mission. She's an expert and believe me, we needed everyone on board who could help." He turned to Gil. "Get your gear and be ready to depart in forty-eight hours. Cassie and I are going to a briefing now to find out about this . . . tech crew I guess."
"Is there anything else you want to show us?" Cassie asked.
"Not now," Harper replied, "but I'd appreciate it if you could stick around for a few minutes. We've got some leftover time from this meeting." She turned to Desmond. "If that's okay with you?"
Desmond smiled. "That's on Cassie. See you guys later." He took off.
Harper motioned for Cassie to follow her.
"How'd the assignment go for you? How'd you feel?"
"Fine," Cassie replied. "Things are great."
"Yes? No ill-effects? Nothing strange?"
Cassie considered her answer carefully. If she was honest, would it prevent her from going on the next mission? Could anything stop her from boarding the Gnosis? A severe issue might. Did her dreams qualify? They didn't impact her performance nor did they bother her while she was awake.

“My dreams have been vivid,” Cassie said. “Far more than ever before. Did . . . did Gil mention that?”
Harper nodded. “Yes. We’ve talked about it extensively as well. We believe the Orb has opened your consciousness, unlocked some part of your mind. That’s why the dreams are more intense. Your mind is able to formulate the images, the fantasies. Gil believes that it would even be possible to unlock some form of precognition.”
“Seriously?” Cassie frowned. “I don’t know. I mean, we saw the past, sure . . . but the future? That seems farfetched even for super science. After all, the visions we had made sense. Those are recorded, maybe even by the Orbs. But beyond an intuition? Developing instinct? I can’t see precognition.”
“You may be right,” Harper replied. “It’s definitely still in the debate phase but that’s what we do. Discuss a vision, test the vision, prove or disprove the possibility and move on to the next. It’s an exciting time. However, back to your dreams. Gil is convinced that they are not dangerous but if anything else happens, please let us know right away.”
“Of course.”
“You should start writing down your dreams. If they’re not too personal, I’d like you to share them. That would help us pinpoint if there are any similarities between you, Heathrow and Gil. If there are, then there might be more going on than simple dreaming. You do feel refreshed when you wake up, right?”
“Yeah, it’s like the best sleep I’ve ever had.”
“Fringe benefit, I suppose.” Harper smiled. “Thank you, Agent. We’ll look forward to your next report and good luck on the mission. From what I understand, we’re getting close to being done with all this nonsense so we can get back to study, exploration and science.”
“That’s what I hear.” Cassie nodded. “Good afternoon.” She left, pausing in the hallway. The events in her dreams hadn’t seemed particularly noteworthy. They were intense, yes, but not wild. Some of them were a touch personal . . . in ways she didn’t want to talk to Harper about but most, she could discuss.
I wonder if they’re going to bother Heat with this request. Cassie figured

he would groan about having to write down his dreams. All things considered, it would be the simplest assignment he'd been given in a long time . . . and likely the hardest for him to get done. The marine didn't seem the type to do a lot of writing.

Nor sharing of his feelings for that matter. Cassie concurred. She didn't look forward to her next talk with the doctor, nor did she like the talk of further experimentation. They wouldn't be doing it with her, but whoever they suckered into it might very well find themselves in a lot of danger.

The mind was a complex, fragile thing. Pushing the limits with alien tech felt irresponsible. Hopefully, someone would find a way to regulate their probes but just then, the order of the day was winning a conflict against the terrorists. Everything else took second place to that, even safety.

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Vincent arrived at the briefing, surprised to find several Pahxin representatives sitting around the table. Admiral Reach was already there but Desmond had yet to arrive. He took a seat, plugging his tablet into the table to tap into the meeting notes. The mission was supposed to be a cakewalk but something must've come up. Otherwise, they would've only been meeting with the admiral.

When Dulain came in, Vincent knew the Gnosis was in for a lot more than they bargained for. *So much for the easy cruise*.

"Commander Bowman," Dulain said. "Good to see you."

"How're things going, Mister Dulain? Did you make headway on the investigation?"

Dulain shrugged. "We're working on it. Top people and all that. You guys ready to make history? Give us the advantage we need to win this war once and for all?"

"I think we're pretty close," Vincent said. "Though I'm a little nervous about our audience." He looked at the others. "Can you guys talk about what you're doing here? Do you have news?"

"They do," Reach replied, "but they'll talk about it when everyone's

here for the briefing. No sense in having them repeat themselves unnecessarily."

Vincent shrugged at Dulain but he figured the intelligence director knew more than he let on. He probably had all the information about the Pahxin's report and then some. What was he doing about the potential traitors? A local faction, terrorists or a militia, had to have been involved but they weren't the standard mercenaries.

None of the prisoners talked. That meant they were conditioned, zealous. Who could field such people? And how had they come to be in league with the Tol'An? Vincent hoped there wasn't a leak in Gamma Alpha but that seemed to be the only explanation. Unless of course the Pahxin had been infiltrated, bringing one of the Tol'An with them inadvertently.

Desmond stepped into the room and took a seat. Reach nodded at him. "I think we're all here. Let's begin. As you all know, the Gnosis would be traveling to an abandoned outpost, an alien station thought to be abandoned. Unfortunately, we have some bad news. The station was discovered by a Pahxin survey crew. They informed the government."

"So much for the big secret," Desmond said. "What did the government do?"

"They sent a tech crew," Reach replied. "That's why we've got a problem. Contact has been lost with that ship. They could've been hit by pirates, some tech problem or their communications may simply be down. Therefore, your assignment is now two-fold. We need to get the Orb, but we also have to find the crew and rescue them if possible."

"Sounds easy enough," Vincent said. "How many could there possibly be?"

"Twenty-five," Reach said. "They were there to bring the entire station back online. Their ship carried several valuable parts as well. It's important that we get that back."

"Are we concerned about opposition?" Desmond asked.

"We should assume there will be, yes." Reach turned to his monitor. "Unfortunately, we have no more specific data about that situation. You'll be our eyes and ears. To that end, we're going to add some

marines to the roster. Doctor Harper's team has finished up some additional power armor suits to take along."
"And we're restocking our fighters?" Desmond asked. "We lost a few in the last operation."
"Yes, we're good to go there." Reach looked at the Pahxin. "Do you have anything you'd like to add?"
"No, sir." One in the middle spoke. "You've covered all we know. Please get our technicians back. They're family people. A couple of them were in the military but they are not fighters anymore. Most are simple workers and we're fearing the worst for their lives. If you were to aid in their safe return, we would be most grateful."
"We'll do what we can," Desmond replied. "I'm getting the impression you guys are intent on this being something more than just a malfunction or environmental hazard. The chances are good we're looking at a technical failure that claimed their lives. If the original intelligence is to be given any weight that is."
"In which case," Reach said, "you'll be reporting the loss and collecting our cargo. But if not . . . and there is a force holding those people, then by God, you'll do whatever it takes to get them back."
Vincent understood the gravity of that statement and just what it meant. He hadn't heard such strong words since he joined the Gnosis. Then again, they hadn't set out to deal with hostages before. He figured the approach came from what happened when the Tol'An kidnapped Reach and the Pahxin ambassador.
I guess he knows what it's like so is willing to do whatever it takes. Vincent appreciated the fact they took the gloves off but it didn't bode well that they had to.

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Desmond walked out of the briefing with Vincent and they headed for the cafeteria. Cassie caught up to them as they walked, calling out for them to hold up. "Hey! Did I miss the briefing?"
"Afraid so," Desmond said. "Turns out we're going into a potential hostage situation. It'll be a rough time but we're getting extra people

for it."
"Great." Cassie frowned. "I have a meeting with Dulain later . . . but I don't think it has anything to do with that. Do you want me to ask him anything?"
Desmond shrugged. "Probably won't matter too much to be honest. We've got everything we need right now. Intel is crap, unfortunately, and we're about to walk into a situation where we may or may not have enemy combatants. From thinking we're heading out to a deserted facility to a fight."
"That's the story of our lives at this point," Vincent muttered.
They all started walking together. "I've got an update about crew numbers," Desmond said. "We're good on the marines. Heat's recovered sufficiently enough to feel ready for the next mission but that's between him and Fielding at this point. Pilots are good as well. Now if we only knew who we were fighting, I think we'd be in great shape."
"Do you think we don't know who we're facing then?" Cassie asked. "Surely, it has to be the Tol'An."
"They'd have the Orb and be gone by now," Vincent said. "It's got to be something else."
"We've run into enough strangeness out there to know this could be anything." Desmond smiled. "But let's be optimistic. With any luck, we'll find those guys have a broken transmitter and can't get it fixed. Sad for the Pahxin technicians but great news for us. Otherwise . . ."
"We'll be in a fight for our lives," Vincent finished.
"Think about this," Cassie said. "If this is the last mission before the final fight, if this leads to the conclusion of the Tol'An, then of course it won't be easy. I've been thinking about fate and destiny recently."
Desmond raised a brow and she quickly nodded. "I know how that sounds, I blame Doctor Harper. But hear me out.
"Things might happen because they're supposed to. That deserted place suddenly becomes a hotbed of activity? Pretty convenient coincidence. I hate to be metaphysical, but maybe the universe thinks we need one more trial before this thing can end. Maybe one last struggle is what we need to be ready for the final fight and the Orb is

the prize."
Vincent turned to Desmond. "What do you think?"
"I think you can call it whatever you want," Desmond replied. "Even if you don't believe in a higher power, the Orbs certainly have taught us enough about super science to believe in *something*. Whether or not the universe is testing the human race, I don't know but I'm pretty sure we'll overcome whatever it throws at us. One way or another."
"I'll eat lunch to that," Vincent said. "You guys game?"
"Yeah." Desmond nodded. "Let's drop the heavy talk for a while. We'll have plenty of time for that later."

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Chapter 3

Ezria stood in his chambers, staring out the window at the crashing waves of the ocean some three hundred yards away. The tranquil scene gave him a sense of gravity, making him feel small amidst such natural fury. As the tides shifted, he accepted the reminder that he was indeed a tiny thing in an unfathomably massive universe.

News came in from the operation against the Kalrawv Group. His people failed to recover the Trindisha. He had not received word about Gizan. If the assassin had not died, he would wish he had. The punishment for a second failure would not be nearly as generous as the first. Even so, the thought was painful.

Ezria knew Gizan since before rising to power. He'd become friends with the man . . . or at least, as much as a leader could, given the circumstances of their organization. They had done great things together, pushed the influence of the Tol'An far beyond what any could've imagined. And now, as the humans entered the scene, Ezria's champion began to fail.

What did this mean? He communed with the Trindisha on the subject, to understand how this fledgling race barely reaching the stars could possibly stand against their might. He did not find any answers, none suitable. The mere fact they succeeded at all confounded him. Had they not allied with the Pahxin, he was fairly convinced they would've fallen.

Their friends are their strength. That gave Ezria comfort. It meant they were not as dangerous as he gave them credit for. One more Trindisha remained loose in the universe, a final opportunity for the Tol'An to consolidate their hold on the devices. With two in their possession, they were already incredibly dangerous.

Four would've made them unstoppable.

The two we have makes us a force to be reckoned with. I will have to sacrifice one to prove the point, however. Destroy the Pahxin homeworld perhaps . . . or maybe Earth. Those would both present them with a definitive example of what we're willing to accomplish and how far we're

willing to go to bring order to them all.
But Ezria found it difficult to destroy one of the objects. He didn't hold any particular passion for them, no love for the information stored within. At least, he thought that might be true. Recently, after spending so much time meditating on them, he developed a possessiveness about them, a desire to keep them close.
The thought of sacrificing even one of them caused his heart to ache.
Will I be able to part with it when the time comes?
"Master." A voice interrupted his thoughts and he turned to look at the soldier standing at attention. "I bring news from the last operation."
"Report."
"Lord Gizan has been declared dead. We lost nearly eighty-percent of our forces on the operation."
"Any captured?"
"Negative. According to our spies, several took their own lives."
"Including Gizan?" Ezria lifted his brows. "Do the enemies have his body?"
"Um . . . no, sir. It must have been obliterated during the fighting. It was not recovered by either side."
Ezria stepped away, staring out the window again. Gizan was crafty, a dangerous man. If there was any chance the man could've survived, he might have. The question was whether or not he would return to the Tol'An after failing. He'd been the most loyal of followers but after spending time in a cell, could his devotion have faltered?
"Send in General Trall," Ezria said. "Right away."
"Yes, master." The man clapped his fist to his chest before backing out of the room.
Ezria needed to ensure the trip to the space station proved fruitful, that they succeeded at something. There was also the matter of finding Gizan. Whether he chose to betray the cause, had been captured in a way that escaped the spies or was actually dead, his fate needed to be confirmed.
If Gizan chose to betray the Tol'An, he would be a painful thorn to contend with. Ezria wondered if they had anyone available who

would be capable of tracking him down, of stopping him should he prove to be a problem. Hopefully, the general would have some suggestions.

Somehow, they needed to know the assassin was out of the picture.

General Trall entered the room, bowing his head briefly before approaching. He shaved his black hair so only stubble remained on his scalp. Tall, muscular and tough, he wore the scars of his office proudly on his face and hands. As a former officer of the Pahxin military, he was an excellent commander.

Had he not been disgraced for the murder of innocents, he might still be working for them. The Tol'An rescued him gave him a purpose and let him know they approved of a man's ability to make difficult decisions. Trall stood by his actions for his new people and his trained military proved successful until recently.

Time to give him a chance where Gizan failed. It was true, Trall had yet to meet the humans in combat. He worked over plenty of Pahxin patrols. He knew their tactics, used their predictability against them but in a subtle enough way to avoid them changing things up. If they knew who they were facing, they were fools.

"I have an assignment," Ezria said. "Undoubtedly you have heard about Gizan."

"Only that he has yet to return," Trall replied. "It is assumed he died."

"I'm not as easily swayed toward that. In fact, I think he may have betrayed us."

Trall shook his head. "Surely not. He is a loyal subject of the Tol'An. Our blade in the darkness."

"Who fell to disgrace with his first failure," Ezria pointed out.

"Compounded by a second that cost us another Trindisha." He shook his head. "No, I feel we must find the right people to track him down. Find him, or his body. Return them here. If he is dead, we can put him with the fallen. If not . . ."

"We will execute him for his failure," Trall spoke firmly, practically spitting the words out. Apparently, his distaste for treason rivaled Ezria's. "Pardon me for asking, but do you believe that he would attempt to stop us from our own work? That he would stand in the

way of our success?"
"Depending on how he feels," Ezria said, "he may do a number of things. I do not trust him now. His failure may have been purposeful but our spies are not able to confirm that. I doubt the humans were able to simply overpower his people, kill them all and take the Trindisha. That seems highly unlikely."
"To me as well." Trall scowled. "Our people were mismanaged during that operation, that much I do know."
"Do you believe you will do better?"
Trall seemed to weigh his response, taking several moments before answering. "I know I will. Once I have the opportunity to field a force against the aliens, these . . . rat humans . . . I will annihilate them."
"Then you will have your wish soon," Ezria replied. "I have sent a destroyer to a distant space station far from here . . . another Trindisha. When they return, we will be ready to launch a full-scale attack on our enemies. Can I trust you to be a light in the darkness? The man to bring honor to our cause?"
"You can, Master Ezria!" Trall slapped his fist against his chest.
"Then go." Ezria pointed. "And don't forget, I want someone assigned to find Gizan. His body must be located . . . or his head should it be attached to a live being."
"Of course, My Lord." Trall departed and Ezria returned to watching the water hit the rocks. Yes, the universe might be massive, it may even make a single individual feel insignificant but when the Tol'An won the war, things would be different. History would know the true leader of all sentient beings and then, he would not feel so small.

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden headed to the hangar, adjusting his flight suit along the way. Someone nudged him in the hallway. Lieutenant Alicia Quinn grinned at him. "Sorry, sir. You looked a little serious for your own good."
"I didn't like the briefing," Dennis said. "Too many unknowns. Might not matter to us but I can't imagine the soldiers are going to have a

good time of it."
"Ah." Alicia nodded. "I see. I thought it might've been something else."
Dennis lifted his brows. "What then?"
"Dala." Alicia looked away. "I figured you were thinking about her."
Dennis felt his cheeks warm. He drew a deep breath. "Yeah, a little. I guess I've been wondering what she's up to. What assignment did the Stalwart take? Is she being just as wildly reckless?"
"That worry you?" Alicia asked.
"Yeah, it does." Dennis smirked. "Kind of ridiculous, huh? She's more than capable. Hell, she made it this far without backup from me. I've been struggling to come to terms with their method of warfare but I bet you get it. You're practically an honorary member of their pilot battalion."
"I like to get things done, true." Alicia winked. "But hey, you're trying to change the subject. Are you going to pursue the girl?"
"That doesn't seem practical." Dennis shook his head. "No, I think it would be best if I kept things platonic. How would we keep in touch even? At some point, they'll assign a different ship to work with us and we'll be separated anyway. No, I'm pretty sure that we had our brief moment . . . and it's probably over."
"I dunno. People find a way if they want to," Alicia replied. They arrived at the hangar doors. "I wouldn't give up if I was you. No reason. Give it a try. Have hope. It's one of the reasons we're out here looking for that damn Orb. Why the marines go into those ridiculously dangerous locations."
"I appreciate your perspective." Dennis patted her on the shoulder. "Sincerely. Now, I think we've got somewhere to be. See you out there. Maybe you won't have to show off any of those heroics you're so keen on, huh?"
"There's always room for those," Alicia said. "You just have to know how to look for them. Good luck, sir. Talk to you soon."

***

Desmond sat in his office on the Gnosis, going through the reports. Everyone showed ready, supplies were full and it was just a matter of timing before they left on the mission. He had made a request to get the Stalwart as support for the mission but it was denied. Even with the potential Tol'An and other unknown threats, high command had faith the Gnosis would be sufficient.

He hadn't told Vincent or anyone else of their decision. He figured it didn't matter. Tweaks to the shields and weapon systems made them far more deadly than their last encounter with the Kalrawv Group. And those people used experimental equipment, state of the art offensive and defensive gear that probably hadn't even been properly tested.

Scavengers, pirates or other fringe groups might stand a chance against the Gnosis but Desmond wasn't worried about facing them. His primary concern rested on the unknown, the things they couldn't quantify. Why was the station abandoned? Who left it behind? They had enough stories about ancient civilizations to be leery of that element above all else.

"Captain," Zach's voice crackled over the speaker. "This is the bridge, do you copy?"

Desmond tapped his tablet to acknowledge. "I'm here. What's up?"

"We are in position for hyperspace. Coordinates are fed into navigation, control has cleared us and we're ready to go on your mark."

"Initiate the countdown," Desmond said, "I'll be up there in just a moment." He killed the connection and headed for the bridge. Zach and Salina suggested they would only be in hyperspace for five hours, which proved to be a dramatic improvement over how long such trips took before.

Through the optimization that was meant to put them in the hands of the Tol'An, and modifications through Pahxin assistance, they had dramatically improved their hyperdrive performance. A couple more generations of hyperdrive module and faster than light travel would become a viable military tactic.

At least when combat happened in systems with close enough

proximity. A twenty-minute hop between one solar system and the next could turn the tide of a battle, especially if an entire fleet could make the journey. Though the Pahxin had yet to perfect such technology, multiple Orbs might just make it happen.

Desmond stepped onto the bridge when they had just reached the one-minute mark. He took his seat beside Vincent who leaned close, speaking quietly. “Pilots are prepped. When we’re a half hour away from emerging, they’ll mount up and be ready for launch upon arrival. Two wings should be able to patrol the area after our initial scans.”

“Perfect. I’ve asked Captain Gabriel to ensure the marines get plenty of rest. They might have a rough time of it when they board the shuttle.” Desmond considered his comment for a moment. “We need to get as much data about that thing before anyone goes over there. Get with Salina and Cassie to ensure they have a solid plan.”

“You think we have to worry about interference again.”

“It’s another unknown place. God knows what we have to deal with. I just want to be prepared.” Desmond smirked. “Gil will probably want in too. Make sure he knows.”

“He’s requested to go with the marines.”

“Hm.” Desmond wanted to ensure the place was safe before he sent any unarmored personnel over but he understood Gil’s desire. The man knew more about ancient cultures than anyone they had access to. Even if that didn’t matter for the assignment per se, it would help them understand the station better and potentially locate the Orb quicker. “Second unit.”

“After the place is secure?”

“At least a beachhead.” Desmond turned to the main screen as Zach reached the thirty second mark. “Alright, folks. Here we go.”

This may well be our last military operation before the final battle. Desmond thought. *I can’t believe we’re so close. We’ve got this, people. We’ve got this*.

***

Salina glanced at the viewscreen as it came online but only just long

enough to see something real. Emerging from hyperspace didn't particularly bother her, not to an extent of feeling fear or struggling with nerves. However, deep in the hindbrain, she needed to witness some reality before diving into the scans and computer data.

Once she got that brief ritual out of the way, she dove into her duties of checking their immediate area for threats and to double check Zach's assessment on the success of their navigation. The first thing to pop up on her screen was the station, some two hours away from their current location.

Other than that, nothing seemed to be moving in the system, no other ships, no vessels . . . not even debris. That struck her as odd, especially considering what they'd seen in every other place they'd visited. Compared to the last hectic location, this one was positively tranquil.

Way too suspicious. Salina directed the scans to the station. Power emanated from within, easily enough to power the whole thing. *Maybe those technicians got the place back online. Unless the people who left it did so in such a hurry that they left the lights on. Possible, but unlikely.*

There were multiple ships docked with the station as well, different varieties. One she found in the database right away. It was the Pahxin government ship, built for repairs and recovery. The people they were looking for remained. Whether they were alive or not, that was another story.

Despite the fact that the scanner picked up the power source, it did *not* find any life forms. *How can I find one but not the other? Is the reactor really* that *powerful? Hm.* Salina turned to Cassie. "Are you checking for the Orb? I've got their reactor but something's blocking life signs."

"No, I don't." Cassie frowned. "There are only two planets orbiting the star in this system and the station isn't anywhere near them. It seems they're dead. The Orb *must* be on the station if it's out here at all. It's more than possible someone else found it already. The thing should be pumping out *something*."

Salina added, "the station's maintaining position artificially. I wonder how long it's been here like this."

"We'll close in," Desmond said. "Will you be able to determine if the station's safe to board? Power armor will protect the marines but a

virus might explain the lack of life readings."
"Yes, and no," Salina replied. "Our instruments are sensitive enough that they should be picking up something as subtle as a virus again. But I'm not detecting interference of any kind."
"What about those three ships?"
Salina sighed. "They're dead ends as well. All systems are functional but we're receiving no data."
Vincent said, "that may be why these ships docked. They thought there was nothing to worry about."
"Good point." Desmond tapped his com, establishing a connection with Captain Gabriel. "Darren, we're on the verge of deploying your people. Once the fighters finish their pass, we'll have the shuttles head in."
"Got it," Darren replied. "Anything to worry about?"
"Suspiciously, no." Desmond frowned. "Hopefully, the fighters will get us some more information. Either way, your guys will be our eyes and ears. I'll let you know shortly. Bradford out." He turned to Vincent. "Have we launched the fighters?"
Vincent nodded. "They're on their way. Should be at the station in less than five minutes at current speed."
"Zach, increase speed," Desmond said. "I want to be close enough for a rapid extraction if needed."
Salina fought back a surge of frustration. Every scan returned the same information, the same nothing. She tapped into the fighter com net, sending a message to their computers. When they passed by the station, their sensors would run a deep scan of the structure and send it directly back to her station.
She didn't hold out much hope but it was better than nothing.

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Chapter 4

Squadron Leader Anna Jager was the first one out of the ship, taking her fighter out to the designated rendezvous. Her Charger unit would form up and take one side of the station while Mustang went on the other. Scans showed the area was blessedly clear of . . . well . . . anything but that felt flat out wrong.

Gnosis control confirmed what she saw. Anna turned her attention to the station, noting the closest ship docked to the thing. It was big, though not quite as large as the Gnosis. It definitely could've held at least a couple of fighters, though it would've been a tight fit. Her database didn't recognize the silhouette.

This gets better and better. Anna spoke to Flight Lieutenant Preston Everest, her second. "Got an opinion about all this?"

"It sucks?"

Anna smirked. "That was more direct than I expected." The rest of the unit formed up with them and they headed out on their patrol pattern. They would fly by two of the docked vessels. Maybe they'd see something on visual that the scanners were missing. Any activity aboard the ships would make the situation seem less eerie.

That's the problem, Anna thought. *This feels flat out creepy—more so than what we've seen so far*.

At first, the station looked like any other they'd seen so far. A technical marvel, hovering in deep space. But as they drew near, it became obvious there was something different about the surface. It was rigid, textured like some kind of reptile. When it caught the light from the distant star, it seemed to glisten.

They passed the first ship docked, the one with no silhouette. Lights emanated from different points across the hull, indicating it had at least minimal power. *So where are all the people?* Terrible thoughts filled her head as her imagination went wild. Disintegration, a horrible disease, and marauders all could've befallen the place.

But there was simply no indication of specifically what happened. They probably needed access to the station computer if they wanted to

understand not only recent events but those in the past as well. What people built the structure and how was it maintained without manual intervention?

"You guys have anything on scans?" Anna asked, ensuring she was connected to Mustang as well. "I've got absolutely nothing."

"Same here," Dennis replied. "Ship on our side looks like it might be Tol'An though. No activity on board. Just a power source running hot."

"I'd say the marines should be good to go in then," Anna said. "Might be the only we'll get any answers about this place." She tapped into Gnosis control. "Command, we've scouted the area and it's clear. No activity on scans. Ships docked all seem to be fully functional and powered up but no souls on board we can detect."

"Keep flying your pattern," Vincent replied. "We're sending the marines in now to dock. You're the eyes out there. With scans being odd, it's important we maintain your presence. Let us know if anything changes."

"Will do." Anna returned the conversation to the others. "You heard him, folks. Sounds like we'll be out here a while longer. Stay alert. God knows when this might turn south on us. Especially if that's a Tol'An ship. I can't believe they just happened to be there then disappeared."

***

Heat sat on the shuttle, staring out the window as it took off. He thought about the situation, about injury and how insane their missions became. This one *seemed* straightforward but he didn't count on it. Something happened to all those people and they were about to find out what the hard way.

Gillet sat beside him along with a whole lot of newbies who hadn't been out of the solar system before. They seemed okay during the jump but flying the shuttle over, he could feel their nerves. Each of them may not have admitted to being scared but they'd have to turn on quite a bit of bravado to be convincing.

Heat came out with little more than bumps and bruises in the last mission. His old armor had to be retired. It saved his life, though he wasn't entirely sure how when he thought back on what happened to him. When he went to look at his armor, it shocked him he managed to walk to the armory.

Gillet nudged him. "You're not convinced this place is deserted."

"If it is, we're going to find a lot of bodies," Heat said. "Three ships worth. And what would've killed them? The Gnosis would've found radiation or contagions. No, I think something's found a way to mask scans and we're going to find a whole lot of people on the station causing havoc."

"So you're thinking we need to be prepared for a fight."

Heat nodded. "A big one."

"We're coming up on the station," the pilot's voice interrupted them. "Docking in less than five minutes. Get yourselves ready. Scans are still pulling nothing. Command is saying you'll want to tap into the first terminal you find and relay information. Speaking of which, Lieutenant Fielding is on the line."

"Hey guys," Fielding said. "Sorry I can't be out there with you. Doctors say I've got another few days before I can do combat ops again. That said, we all know this isn't as easy as it seems. When you get in there, I want you all to set up a perimeter around the airlock and start scouting the area. Push out into other modules slowly until we discover what happened."

"You don't want us to just go balls out?" One of the new guys, Private Hendricks said. "You know, dash out there and see what happens?"

"We don't need that, Private," Fielding said. "And keep the chatter down. I'm initiating a camera check right now." He paused. "Looks good. You're docking now. Act in unison, gentlemen. That goes for all you rookies. Follow your team leads and you'll be fine. This is just another assignment."

You know, Heat thought, *with a totally unknown force that we're about to face with zero intelligence on an alien facility. But yeah, totally normal. Just like a tour in the jungles of Africa. Relax about it.*

Heat exchanged a glance with Gillet. He had to be thinking the same

thing.
The shuttle rattled as it settled against the station. The sides of the door slammed against the walls, creating a vacuum seal around the smaller entrance. Once they pressurized, they would pop the station door and gain access. When the hissing stopped, Gillet stepped forward and used his tablet, attempting entrance.
Heat watched him work and grew concerned when the man stood up straight. “What’s up?”
“Looks like Pahxin codes,” Gillet said. “That’s odd. Maybe they *did* bring the station back online after all.”
“They were a tech crew,” Heat pointed out. “Does that mean you can open it?”
“Doing so now.”
The door slid upward, revealing a hallway illuminated by dim lights overhead. Heat took a step out, checking his HUD for any changes in the air, anything to be concerned about. It read perfectly normal. The station module ahead looked large enough for at least Heat’s team to stand inside.
“We’re entering the station proper,” Heat said over the com. “Probing other modules will begin soon. Has the other team docked? We need to sync up.”
“They’re docking now, Heat,” Fielding said. “I’ll get you guys hooked up. For now, secure the area. The shuttle will remain in place until you’re done as a means for quick extraction so I want that area locked down. Leave guards.”
“I’m on it.” Heat turned to a couple of the new guys. “You stay here. No one gets to the shuttle. If it looks like you can’t hold the line for any reason, inform the pilot and have him detach right away.” He turned to Gillet. “Let’s start scouting this place. Orb’s gotta be here somewhere they figure.”
“We’ll find it.” Gillet headed into the next module. “Though it might take a while. This place is huge.”
“The other team will shorter work of it.” Heat paused as his HUD glitched. He tapped his helmet and it steadied. “Odd. Did your tech just give you trouble?”

Gillet shook his head. “Nope, I’m good.”
Heat nodded. He stepped into the module, taking in the smooth walls and grated floor. Darkness covered the floor beneath them but every footstep caused an echo, indicating at least several feet of open space beneath them. Three doors led off in different directions, deeper into the station.
The one on the left *seemed* like the best choice, though Heat had no idea why. It was literally a gut feeling, a moment of intuition. He thought about it for a brief moment and headed that way. His team fell in behind him and as he approached, the door slid open. The HUD picked something up, something organic.
Metal consoles stood in the center of the room, like computer banks surrounding a platform. A considerable amount of blood coated one of them, marring the floor. Heat stepped closer, crouching beside it. His HUD picked up a device nearby, some kind of small tablet. The screen was cracked but it still had a power source.
“Lieutenant,” Heat said, picking it up. “I found something. I don’t think I can access it here but maybe if we bring it back to the shuttle, the Gnosis can try something. Also, something did happen here. I found a lot of blood. No body.”
“But scans aren’t picking it up?” Fielding asked. “How’d you find the blood?”
“It was in the next room,” Heat said. “But my scan only detected it when I got close enough to see. Looks like it’s Pahxin for sure. I suppose it’s possible they dumped the body out the airlock but I have a feeling we’re going to find something horrifying in the place.” He stood up. “We’ll get the tablet back to the shuttle and continue our sweep.”

***

Cassie continued pinging the area, hoping she missed something. Nothing came back, time and again. The marines entered the station and even so, their reports didn’t show any additional information. She began to worry that the Orb had been moved, or even taken. The

docked Tol'An ship indicated their enemies arrived ahead of them. If they got the Orb, why would they abandon one of their ships? That didn't make any sense but the terrorists had shown their propensity for waste before. Perhaps the prize of gathering another of the devices outweighed the ship or maybe they lost enough people that they could only pilot one.

The questions annoyed her and there was no easy way to gather more data.

"Cassie," Salina said. "Heat and his team found a tablet on board. They've plugged it into the shuttle."

"Pahxin?" Cassie asked.

"Yeah. Cracked screen but the data seems to be okay. It's encoded." Salina grinned. "I thought you might want a chance to bust it."

"Thanks!" Cassie logged into the shuttle's computer then accessed the device. Whoever it belonged to used a simple password to protect their data. It didn't require any real hacking to get into it. Once a basic decryption program ran, she had access to an entire array of audio data.

Cassie put on her headset and brought up the first one, hitting play. She had to read subtitles for what he was saying in Pahxin. "My name is Zahl Dray, and I'm a pirate. Everyone needs to know what happened to my crew. This station is cursed. There is no other way to explain what I have seen."

The chilling message ended and Cassie turned to Desmond. "Captain," she said, "Heat and his crew found something big."

"Signs of the crew?"

"Maybe. An audio log from a pirate who boarded the station at some point. It was recorded somewhat recently." Cassie paused. "There's quite a bit here to go through but he did mention something about the place being cursed and that something happened to his crew. It sounds pretty bad."

"Okay, dive in." Desmond turned to Vincent. "Warn those marines. This sounds a little superstitious but better to be on the safe side."

Vincent spoke on the com for a moment. "They found blood over there."

“Lends some weight to the concern,” Cassie said. “I’ll listen ahead and see what I discover.” She ran a program which would translate the recording and alter it to English on a separate track. That would be for a briefing later. Cueing up the next recording, she drew a deep breath and hit play.

***

The firing line drove back the attackers. Zahl noted his own people didn’t make it out unscathed. He didn’t even know who survived and who didn’t. Chaos swept over the ranks and Captain Rand didn’t seem to be doing anything about it. That’s when he noticed his leader lying on his side, his stomach wide open.

He might’ve been unconscious but the injury would claim his life momentarily.

“What’s going on?” The way the person screamed the question was so frantic, Zahl had no idea who asked. “What are those freaks? What’re we doing?”

No one stepped up to give any orders but they all began to panic. A couple headed back toward the ship but they were barred. A brawl began. Some wanted to leave immediately, others demanded they claim the prize. They were there for the technical ship, not to flee empty handed.

Zahl recognized they didn’t have the money to walk away but after the attack, he felt it would be wise to find easier prey elsewhere. However, throwing his voice into the midst of the others didn’t make a lot of sense. They were arguing, not looking for solutions. And the fighting began a few moments after that.

A few shoves, some punches then the weapons came out. Half the crew burst off and went to a different module to confer. The others guarded the ship, trying to decide what to do. Zahl went with the cooler headed people, stepping away from their own vessel. He figured they needed a plan fast. The freaks who attacked them might be back at any moment.

“I don’t have to take your orders!” One man shouted. It led to a

shoving match. Zahl backed away. They weren't behaving like themselves, not remotely. Rabble rousers had long since left the crew through various means. They mostly got along a few random disagreements aside.

Zahl hadn't seen such behavior since they first got together and no one trusted Rand. Had the captain's presence been so great that his death immediately made the crew fall apart? That didn't seem likely. And yet they were all behaving like idiots in the face of a real threat, a danger none of them understood.

They'd all seen irrational behavior on their jobs, but usually from their victims. The pirates had all been tested under fire. Not a man among them had gone away unscathed throughout their careers. Injuries could be survived and they recognized that. So what about this particular situation pushed them over the edge?

Perhaps the ferocity of their combatants, the people that charged them. Zahl never imagined he would witness such a spectacle of men throwing their lives away as they bolted for a firing line. The lack of self-preservation offered an intimidation value, one that was hard to ignore.

The bickering escalated as the crew divided up into two sides. One wanted to leave, the other demanded they stay. Violence became an option for both. Zahl stepped in, pointing out they had a common enemy somewhere else on the station. At first, they ignored him but then they agreed. Those killers should be hunted down.

"That's not what I'm saying!" Zahl shouted. "We should not risk our lives to fight with those maniacs. We can get out of here and find easier game. The captain would not want everything we worked so hard for to be dashed over a single job. We have a ship . . . We have the means to take another score. Let's go!"

"Vengeance!" They shouted the word in unison. Their eyes went wide and wild. They charged off into the station, leaving Zahl to stare after them in baffled shock. Not a single one hesitated except him. They were caught up in a severe bloodlust, a hunger for murder that none of them exhibited before.

"It isn't that bad!" Zahl shouted after them but they were already

gone. If he could've flown the ship, he might've abandoned them. It wasn't an option. Resigned to watch the spectacle, he moved after them at a distance, to see what exactly would happen and whether or not they would succeed and murdering those who attacked them.

***

Cassie rubbed her eyes as the audio finished playing. Why would those men go to such an extreme? If the pirate's words were to be believed, then there was no reason for them to get so riled up. Perhaps something was released into the air during the violence, a chemical no one was looking for while the fighting raged.

She checked the scans of the station again, frowning at how little it came back with. Perhaps their sensors were simply not tuned to catch whatever occupied the station but she knew there was something. It was just a matter of figuring out how to measure it. She sent the transcript to Desmond then shared it with Salina as well.

The next audio file needed time to decompress. She occupied herself with probing different frequencies with her scanner, different methods of gathering data. Power armor protected against particulates but if the problem was not measurable, would it be hindered by technology? Cassie needed to find out quickly to help those men and ensure they remained safe. With Salina's help, they might find something but they didn't have any time for trial and error. She needed to listen to more of the audio, to find out what happened next. Perhaps the answer would present itself there and give them a quick edge.

It might even lead to the discovery of the Orb. Cassie watched the percentage meter rise past eighty, tapping the console impatiently. Curse to her represented something the man didn't understand, a scientific explanation for strange behavior. The Orb taught her that some things might be beyond comprehension.

But probing led to answers. She simply needed to be willing to keep poking.

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Chapter 5

Christina pulled Agent Sandoval Essex to accompany her on the mission. He'd been with the agency for just over a year. Before that, he'd been a marine with a solid record and over a dozen combat ops to his name. He'd never gone out alone but he expressed his confidence in what they were about to do.

She didn't particularly want to go with someone brand new. Part of her worried about their loyalty but she couldn't go down that path. If she didn't trust people within her own organization, then the AIA was in serious trouble. Even so, she double checked his records and ensured the details were accurate.

They didn't have time for a full vetting process. She met him in the hangar, geared up in a tactical suit complete with bulletproof padding on the chest and legs. A helmet provided access to her tablet as well as a HUD with scanning capabilities. She armed herself with a submachine gun, a pistol and two fragmentation grenades.

Sandoval stood around waiting for her. He dressed the same but he favored a larger assault rifle for his primary. He also carried more grenades, including some flashbangs. He stood at attention when she approached, his black hair barely grown out from having recently been shaved.

Brown eyes stared straight ahead, his dark skin seemed to be covered with sweat.

"You nervous about something, Agent?" Christina asked.

"No, ma'am!" Sandoval shouted.

"This isn't the marines." Christina passed him by and boarded the shuttle. "We can de-formalize a bit. Come on. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

Essex sat across from her, his posture textbook perfect. He looked like a marine recruitment poster. If he planned on sticking with the AIA, he needed to loosen up. Anyone would pick him out as a spy in about a minute and a half. Maybe he could stick to combat operations but that wasn't why most people joined them.

Christina tried to remember if she'd been so stiff when she first started. She remembered nerves, certainly but not specifically being so rigid and bound by military protocol. She'd always been a little defiant of authority. Pretending to be Major Dawson, working for the admiral, that had been the hardest ruse of her life.

"You should probably relax," Christina said. "This job's not about starched collars and getting to the mess hall on time."

"I'm trying to figure that out."

"What did you do in the marines? Combat unit?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Christina nodded. "Let's start with titles. Just call me *Christina*."

"Er . . . okay." Essex cleared his throat.

"So when you were out there putting boot to ass for your country, did you always follow protocol? I thought marines were all about improvising and overcoming obstacles. You know, facing down threats regardless of the circumstances."

"We definitely met any obstacle and defeated it, ma . . . Christina."

"Okay." Christina shrugged. "Just remember that everything you encounter in this position is totally out of the ordinary. It's coming from left field and will *not* let you follow a rule book or process. We're in the business of improv. Acting, what we do . . . hell, even this trip. Would you believe the plan to come out here was conceived about six hours ago?"

"So soon?"

"Yep. We need intel so here we are," Christina waved her hands about, "heading out to a god forsaken base in the middle of nowhere to check something."

"I'm not entirely sure I understand the mission," Essex said. "You mentioned we have a traitor? What're they doing? Who are they betraying us to?"

"They're somehow getting information to the terrorists, the Tol'An. I'm not sure how they even got a hold of them. There's a chance that we've been infiltrated by one of their agents . . . in which case, we have to root them out."

"Do you expect us to find them here?"

“Unfortunately, I can’t be sure. We picked up a signal but scans aren’t showing anything. They might be using advanced technology to hide.”
Christina smiled. “Visual is the only way to be sure. Even if they aren’t there, we might find some evidence that will lead us to them.”
“Wait . . .” Essex sat forward. “Beside the pilot, we’re only going in there with two people? Where’s our backup?”
“What’s that?”
“Excuse me?”
Christina smiled. “We’re the backup. Spies, remember? Go behind enemy lines, do crazy stuff, get the information we need . . . I picked you because you’re highly trained and highly motivated. I hope I was right.”
“You were, but . . .” Essex stared at the floor for a long moment. “I suppose I never imagined we would be going into a potential combat mission with only two people.”
“Don’t worry, if it’s totally insane, we’ll just extract and send in a team. Otherwise, this is all stealth. We shouldn’t have too bad of a time.”
The pilot called back to them. “We’ll be at the drop off point in less than ten minutes. I’m going in low, below any scan range. Even advanced tech shouldn’t grab us.”
“Thanks,” Christina said. She turned to Essex. “We’ll have a bit of a hike but the shuttle will be nearby for a quick extraction if we need it.”
“Great, I never mind a little winter stroll.” Essex finally grinned. “I see why people don’t complain about this job. It’s more exciting than I thought it would be.”
“Believe me, if I hadn’t pulled you, I think you would’ve been doing evals and escorts for the better part of two years. Hopefully, we survive this thing and you get fast tracked for your efforts. Watch my back and you’ll definitely have my recommendation. Hey, one more thing, don’t hesitate to put a target down. We can get intel without them. Clear?”
“I have no qualms putting a target down.”
Christina believed him. He might be green, he might’ve been too rigid

but whenever they got marines, those men were capable of doing the dirtier parts of the job. It was the one thing trainers didn't have to push on them. Killing represented a habit they already possessed. AIA operatives tended to come from the tech or educational fields.
People like Cassandra Alexander were the type that tended to flourish in the AIA in peace time but wartime . . . Well, Essex had an advantage there.
The shuttle swooped low and remained hovering while the back doors dropped. Christina dropped the mask on her helmet, bringing up a HUD. The mountains stretched out to the left and right, pure snowy desolation all around them. She hopped onto the ledge, allowing her tablet to provide a path to their destination.
Essex stepped out behind her and the shuttle pulled away, remaining low and heading east. Christina pulled a com check before heading out. They had a two-mile hike to get to their destination. Providing their pilot proved to be correct about his approach, they should've had an advantage.
If he was wrong . . . they might just be walking into a real shit show.

***

Fielding listened to the briefing from Captain Gabriel concerning what happened to the pirates. He cursed under his breath, turning to address his men. Everyone knew there was some sort of unknown out there but this might've exceeded all concerns. Random, odd behavior brought on by something undetectable definitely did not make his list of potential issues.
"Heat, I've got some bad news." Fielding explained what they knew so far. "Agent Alexander's trying to find more data now but I don't know how long it's going to take. If you guys experience anything strange, I want you back at the shuttle immediately. Don't hesitate. Get me?"
"Understood." Heat sighed. "Was that a private message straight to me then?"
"It was."
"Got it." Heat turned to Gillet and tapped his helmet. "Go private,

buddy."
"What's wrong?" Gillet asked. "Did they finally figure out what's going on here?"
"Partially. Enough to know that people went nuts for no conceivable reason yet." Heat gestured ahead of him. "Let's press on in that direction. I want to check the power core in this place. If the tech crew brought it back online, we'll know. Plus, that would be the most logical location for a device to block our scans."
"How so?"
"Stopping us from getting life signs?" Heat shook his head. "It would take a lot of energy to pull that off. Anyway, I'll lead the way." He took point, pressing through to the next module. The marines filed in behind him but he sensed a level of hyper-awareness in his men. They were definitely picking up the odd vibe and it manifested in nerves. Heat's HUD picked up a vibration, some kind of noise roughly sixty yards to his left. The others started chattering about it so he knew he wasn't the only one. *I wonder if that would've counted for the type of strange behavior Fielding called out*. He altered course, moving to the left and pressing through the next door.
A beam of energy seared the wall not even six inches from his head.
"Contact!" Heat shouted the word, dashing forward. The room he entered housed multiple computer consoles, each one no more than waist high. He dropped into a crouch to take cover. Gillet joined him while the others remained at the door, standing around the corner.
"Did you see them?" Gillet asked.
"No, and there's *still* nothing on scans." Heat lifted his weapon, aiming it over the console to use the camera on the weapon. He caught shadows moving against the wall. There were at least three people and they had enough sense to stay down. That didn't match up with what Cassie heard about in her audio file.
Maybe these are unaffected.
"Stand down!" Heat yelled. "We're not your enemies. Throw down your weapons and we'll talk about this!"
Weapons buzzed, casting beams that seared the metal walls around the door. Heat slipped to the side, remaining crouched. He saw the

guns sticking out over the console and as he moved, he found an angle that afforded him a shot on one of their sides. He took aim and fired a burst.

The target screamed, blood splattered everywhere. Two men ran for the door. “They’re running!” Heat shouted, firing after them. He caught one in the legs and before the other could make it out, Gillet popped him in the head. The two of them checked the bodies, finding them all quite dead.

“Clear!” Gillet called to the others. “For the moment. Lock this place down!”

Each body wore a blue jumpsuit with an insignia that Heat didn’t recognize. He took a shot of it and sent it to Fielding. “Lieutenant, we’ve encountered a hostile force. They took some shots at us and we were forced to retaliate. Three down. No injuries on our side. I’ve sent you an image of one of their insignias. Can you please check the database?”

“I’m on it,” Fielding said. “So you were in the room with them? Did they show up on your HUD?”

“No.” Heat hesitated for a moment. “We’re making our way to the power core of the station. I’m hoping we’ll find a device that might be causing this . . . invisibility.”

“Good idea. That insignia is Pahxin. Technical division of their government.” Fielding sighed. “Did you just kill some of the men we were here to save?”

“Sir, they fired on us,” Heat replied. “And they would not comply when asked to stand down. This was self-defense. They had zero interest in conversation.”

“Understood, but this is still going to be a problem. We’ll need some more evidence to prove they were in an odd state of mind. Do what you can, Heat.”

“Gunny,” Vine spoke up. “I’ve got some movement over here now. That same vibration . . . I guess footsteps on the deck?” He was indicating the direction they needed to go to get to the power core. Heat noticed it too, this time far more prominent than what drew them into the room with the tech guys.

Heat's HUD flickered and for a moment, he saw *dozens* of blips all around them on the scans. They were in every module less than a hundred yards away and they were closing in. Just as the scanner went blank again, people began to scream all around them. The cacophony rose until it became impossible to tell how many might be out there.

Why'd my HUD work for a moment? Heat shook his head. *We don't have time to worry about that.* "Fall back toward the shuttle!" He shouted. "Get your asses moving, people! Gillet and I have the rear now go!"

The marines fell out, rushing the way they'd come. Heat felt a rush of urgency as adrenaline filled his veins. His men moved quickly but being at the back of the line put him directly between them and a couple more random shots from their opponents. Once those people, if that's what they were, got a firing solution, he was pretty sure they'd open up.

Beam weapons started buzzing and Heat instinctually ducked but the action wasn't taking place in their module. In fact, it was happening on the other side. Had they started fighting amongst themselves? Without scans, he couldn't tell for sure but it would make sense based on what Fielding told him about the pirate's message.

A marine fired at the front of the line. Heat clenched his weapon tighter, trying to see what happened but the corridor was too narrow. "Report! What's going on?" The station shook and air hissed for a moment before a loud clatter resounded through the module. "What the hell is going on?"

"Hendricks fired on us!" Vine shouted. "He's . . . He's gone!"

"Clear the Goddamn way!" Heat shoved them forward, stepping into the module. The door leading to the shuttle was down, cutting off the short hallway that led to their ship. Hendricks and the other guy, Stellen, were gone. The others gathered around. "Okay, what the hell? Gillet, form a perimeter. What did you see, Vine? What happened?"

"We came in . . . Our own guys fired at us. Stellen dashed down the hall . . . He started shooting . . ." Vine shook his head. "Hendricks followed him and the shuttle disconnected from the station. The airlock closed and . . . they're gone!"

“Jesus Christ.” Heat turned away, motioning to the doors. “No one comes through those! Keep them *locked down*.” He got on the com. “Fielding, we have a serious problem! We haven’t encountered team two yet and our shuttle just became dislodged from the station. Two men went with it. Do you see them? Are they okay?”

“Stand by,” Fielding said. Heat forced himself not to pace, especially as the screams from other rooms grew more intense. The weapon fire remained in the beam variety but only a few moments passed before their own type of rifles started going off, the report of projectiles adding to the chaos and mess.

“Lieutenant . . .” Heat said. “We’re getting pretty damn short on time here, sir.”

“We have the shuttle,” Fielding said. “But they’re not responding to com messages. They’ve engaged the engines so there might be a problem. I don’t see your men. I’m having the fighters do a pass to find out. Also . . . more bad news, I can’t raise team two or their shuttle. You’re on your own for a moment but I’d make my way to the other ship. It’s still docked.”

“But you can’t raise them,” Heat said. “Okay, we’ll head that way.”

“Gunny!” Vine shouted. “I think we’re about to have incoming!”

“You heard what I said,” Heat replied. “It moves, you kill it. I want you to all remain focused. Listen to me, follow orders and we’ll get through this. No mistakes. We’re in this for keeps, gentlemen.”

“Heat,” Gillet said. “You heard those guns too. That’s team two . . . and if they’re not answering coms, they might have had the same problem that Hendricks and Stellen had.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Heat demanded.

“That’s the problem. We don’t know and there’s no real way to find out easily.”

“What do you propose?” Heat asked. “Because I’m not seeing a lot of options here. We’re going to have to get through them, find a way off this place. If the Orb’s here, we’ll need another way to get it.”

“I don’t . . . really know.” Gillet paused. “I . . . I don’t even know why I brought that up. It was like . . . I was just looking for an argument.”

Heat recognized it. The way his friend acted, it made sense. That’s

what happened to the pirate's people. "We have to stay focused. Just follow my lead." He pointed at the door. "We're going to go through there and kill whatever's in our way. Hopefully, team two is still on our side. Alright, I'm first one out the door. Here we go!"

Heat stepped up to the entrance to the next module and the door slid open. A firefight raged within, two sides blasting away. He immediately recognized the uniform of four Tol'An operatives, shooting it out with five more of the Pahxin technicians. He was about to order an attack when a third group came in through another door. The newcomers were dressed in tattered rags, carrying makeshift melee weapons. They descended upon the technicians, battering their skulls and taking them to the ground. As their victims fell, they dropped on top of them, ripping at their flesh with bare hands and knives. The display looked like something out of a horror vid.

The Tol'An didn't hesitate, they turned to Heat's men and started to lift their weapons.

"Light them up!" Heat shouted, firing his own weapon. They riddled their targets with bullets, making them dance back against the wall. When they finished, he turned, noting that the guys with the melee weapons were gone . . . along with the bodies they'd attacked. "Are you kidding me? Did anyone see them go?"

"I missed it," Gillet said.

"Doesn't matter." Heat plunged on toward the shuttle. "Let's just keep moving. I'm sure we'll find those guys when we have to. Hopefully, they just knew their weapons wouldn't work on us."

But he saw the way they looked when they attacked their prey. They had a specific task in mind and would be back. Of that, he was certain. The key was to be gone long before that confrontation could take place . . . and they had to find out just how tough a bunch of psychotic freaks with clubs could be.

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Chapter 6

Cassie rubbed her eyes hard as a sudden headache struck. It washed over her the moment she performed another system sensor sweep while waiting for the next audio file to prepare. When she opened her eyes, she gasped, recoiling into her seat with enough force to make it squeak.

“Cassie?” Salina said. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

The muffled voice became a peripheral sound on the edge of her awareness. Cassie typed furiously, trying to capture what she saw. Beyond the ship, far out beside the station, debris floated about the area, a boneyard of vessels and natural rubble. Life signs littered the entire station, hundreds of them moving about.

“Hey!” Salina snapped her fingers next to her. “Can you hear me? What happened?”

Cassie felt Vincent and Desmond come close as well. She recognized their concern, each of them leaning to look at what she saw.

“Um . . .” Vincent spoke up. “What’re we looking at?”

“The scan . . .” She pointed at the screen. “There’s . . . Look!”

Salina moved over, peering over her shoulder. “I don’t see anything. It’s the same nothing we’ve been looking at.”

“No!” Cassie gestured again then tapped her controls to bring it up on the main screen. “Look! There are hundreds of people on the station! Destroyed ships, debris, rubble! Look!”

They all complied, turning to peer at the big screen. Desmond exchanged a concerned look with Vincent but before they could speak, Salina held up her hand.

“Before we judge this, remember what the marines just located.” Salina motioned to her own station. “I haven’t been able to find anything but what she’s describing sounds far more accurate to what we would’ve expected. Especially after her little pirate broadcast. Which would mean something is not jamming our scans at all.”

“What’re you suggesting?” Desmond asked. “What do you think is happening then?”

Cassie stood up. “I know.” She got on the com, patching into Gil. “Can you please report to the bridge right away?” Turning to the others, she composed herself with a deep breath. “I had contact with the Orb. It took a bit, pressing and finding out about these pirates but I think that’s why I can see the truth now.”

“Whatever it is,” Salina said, “is blocking our minds. Making us see specifically what it wants us to see . . . Which, in this case, is nothing.”

“Luring us in,” Desmond replied. “Offering us a false sense of security so we’d board the facility.” He looked sharply at Vincent. “And get close. Zach! Full reverse. Get us well away from that station. Vincent, get Fielding to have those marines extract right away. If what Cassie described is happening, they’re in over their heads.”

Gil stepped onto the bridge, his expression grave. “I suppose I will not be going to the station then?”

“Come look at my screen!” Cassie pointed. “Quick!”

Gil joined her, leaning to peer at it. “My apologies, I’ve been suffering from . . . a . . . severe . . . headache. What am I looking at? I thought this sector was clear. Totally empty. That was part of the mystery I hoped to solve.” He turned back to Cassie. “What’s happened? Where did all that come from?”

“Think through it,” Cassie said. “You and I are the only ones who are seeing this on the bridge.”

“Oh my.” Gil stepped closer to the captain. “Are we putting distance between us and the station?”

“We are.”

“I wonder if this is somehow contagious.” Gil rubbed his chin. “We would need samples from the station to find out. Air, blood from those exposed to it . . . perhaps even from the metal walls themselves. But I’m guessing that won’t be happening. Do we know if the marines have acted peculiar?”

“Fielding’s having a hard time with communications,” Vincent said. “I reached out to have the marines return to the ship as soon as possible but he wasn’t able to raise them on hails.”

“Shit.” Desmond scowled. “Have the pilots try. They’re in close

proximity. We need to check in with them anyway. See if they're having any problems. Being right there might've triggered something. Thank you, Cassie. Keep at those audio files. Gil, help her. I want to know how that played out."
"This doesn't make sense though," Salina said. "Why wouldn't our pilots have run into all that stuff out there? How would they be able to pass right through unscathed? They would've bumped into *something*. The statistics of them avoiding it all without seeing it are astronomical. Not even worth calculating."
Gil answered, "whatever this is likely is keeping them alive. This type of manipulation could range from extremely subtle to overt. If this force can blind us to the reality of the situation, think of what else it might push on us? No, what we're faced with here is utterly fascinating. Certainly, the most potent thing I've encountered in many years."
"Glad to have impressed you," Desmond said. "I think we can get back to work now, folks. We'll have time to theorize later. I want everyone safe *then* we'll decide what to do next."

***

Dulain arrived at Reach's office, knocking twice before entering. The admiral looked up, his face strained from stress. According to reports from his subordinates, he hadn't been sleeping well and it was starting to show. Eventually, he'd need some downtime and the AIA was prepared to help him realize it.
Until then, they needed to collaborate and keep the machine moving.
"I'm just here to give you a quick update," Dulain said. "Two of our operatives are infiltrating a base in Eastern Europe. Marines cleared it out a few years ago but apparently, someone's decided it was too good of a place to ignore. They might not be there anymore, but we figure we can grab some evidence."
"And you think these might be the traitors you're tracking?"
"Evidence supports they might be using this location," Dulain replied. He took a seat. "We'll know soon. I sent Christina to investigate."

“Seems rash,” Reach said, “sending your lead agents on such a mission. Surely, you have other people more suitable.”
“Maybe, but not better.” Dulain shrugged. “She’s going to find what we need out there if there’s anything to find. And if not, she’ll be back soon. My instincts tell me we’re going to find something though and get closer to catching the people who are undermining our efforts. Then, we can unleash the military.”
“That promise was rather bold, I admit.”
Dulain smiled. “Yes, Christina wasn’t happy about it but I understand the purpose. It gives us the opportunity to keep everyone involved. They don’t like being kept in the dark any more than we do. Unfortunately, once intelligence turns things over to our militant friends, we tend to be cast aside. We have to be sure before we step away.”
“Understood. Thank you for working so closely with us. It’s a refreshing change from when you were spying on me.”
Dulain wondered when that would come up again. He wasn’t surprised. Reach made it clear how sore he was about Christina being planted with him but even after a couple good venting sessions, he remained vocal about his dissatisfaction. There wasn’t much to be done about it other than to apologize again.
“You were in the midst of something we needed in on with unfettered intelligence,” Dulain explained again. “It wasn’t personal and honestly, it worked out. She saved your life when you were captured after all. I’d say it was a good thing, even if you didn’t necessarily like what it meant.”
“Yes, well . . . it’s just refreshing to all be working together as we should’ve been.”
“I take full responsibility for that decision,” Dulain said. “But I won’t apologize again. I think we’re past that now. It’s time to move on. In fact.” He checked his watch. “I need to get up to operations. I want to know the second Christina’s mission is complete. We might have to take immediate action, after all.”
“Keep me informed,” Reach said. “We’ll talk later.”
“Indeed.” Dulain left the room, walking casually toward the control

center. There would be no news for hours but that didn't stop him from wanting to be out of the admiral's presence. They'd been working well together but there were limits to their tolerance of one another. The past wasn't kind to either of them for various reasons. *But at least we're making progress*, Dulain thought. *No one can argue our results*.

***

Alicia allowed her fighter to drift, on her patrol pattern, sitting to take in her surroundings. She figured space would be desolate, empty . . . perhaps even boring at times but she never expected such an absolute wasteland. How did the previous inhabitants bring about such a state? Did they have incredible recycling? Cleaning crews?
Who cares? Alicia sighed. They didn't need fighters on that mission, they needed the shuttles. They could've flown around and gathered data, proving the place was empty. Those larger vessels had better scanning equipment anyway. But command worried about aerial engagements so . . . Charger and Mustang scrambled.
I keep hearing this is probably the last mission we'll run without an attack force, Alicia thought. *I can't believe it's going to be a milk run that ends with us falling asleep behind the flight sticks.*
"All pilots," Dennis's voice broke through the boredom for a moment. "I have some bad news. Command has just reported that we need to return to the Gnosis immediately. Make your way back as quickly as possible. Follow the course I'm sending to your computers to avoid any collisions."
"What?" Alicia didn't bother to hide her skepticism. "What are you talking about? Collision with what? Open space? Come on, sir. This place is empty."
"Not according to the report," Dennis insisted. "We'll take up your concern when we arrive back at the ship, Flight Lieutenant. Now move!"
Alicia shook her head, altering course to follow the odd line Dennis put up on the monitor. It was erratic, moving very much like they

were going through an invisible obstacle course. *Maybe this is just a test*, she thought. *What else makes sense? That solid debris and obstacles are actually invisible?*

But hadn't they encountered plenty of strange things already? *Command wouldn't throw this out if it wasn't necessary*. She started along the path, matching the recommended speed when her scanner went crazy. Blips appeared, not even a thousand kilometers behind her from the other side of the station.

"Um . . . you guys seeing this?" Alicia asked. "I've got contact."

"Negative I . . ." Dennis stopped mid-sentence. "Holy crap. Those are on an intercept course!"

Alicia took a breath to reply when the world around her seemed to shimmer. Rocks, chunks of metal the size of small buildings appeared, winking into existence. It took every ounce of discipline she could muster not to react, jerking her flight stick to compensate for the sudden perception of being surrounded.

The com channel lit up with shock as the other pilots must've suddenly seen what they were supposed to avoid as well. *I'll never question command on their crazy again*, Alicia thought, veering to clear the debris field. She hit her afterburners, putting distance between her and the boneyard before turning her attention to the incoming fighters.

"Are we engaging?" Alicia asked.

"Trying to hail them now," Dennis said. "But they're not answering on any com network. These ships don't look like any we've encountered before. Not Kalrawv or Tol'An . . . not Pahxin. What the hell are they?"

Commander Bowman came on the line. "Gil states that these ships you're seeing commonly belong to scavengers. They likely fell victim to whatever you're seeing out there because they are *not* responding to any coms at all. However, we're picking up an energy spike consistent with weapon systems. You are free to attack."

Works for me. Alicia acquired a target though it was still out of range. Dennis gave them the go order as well as they formed up on one another. Racing to meet the attackers, scans gave them a good readout

of what to expect: missiles and beam weapons. The heavier ordnance rode outside, on the bottoms of the ships.

Shields remained on par with Tol'An designs, but not as good as what the Earth ships packed. Their research and partnership with the Pahxin paid off, giving them a defensive advantage. *That's all well and good, but why are these guys attacking us at all? Are they trying to defend their claim?*

Distance to target began to plunge, numbers spinning on the HUD. Alicia doubled her front shields. Enemy ships opened fire, beams cutting through the dark of space. They didn't seem to be aiming, their attacks lacking any sort of consistent trajectory. Even their formation suffered as their ships hopped out like the pilots were shaking the flight sticks violently.

Dennis came up beside Alicia, dodging quickly away when a series of blasts came between them. It was the first time the enemy ships actually tried to connect with them. She closed within range, firing energy weapons at her first target. It veered wildly out of the way, a dramatic overcompensation that nearly made it collide with one of its allies.

"What the hell?" Alicia dove to avoid another attack, performing a barrel roll before climbing sharply. She came around behind an enemy ship and blasted him, tearing through the shields. Chunks of metal broke free as the thrusters went dark. She switched to projectiles, perforating the fuselage of her target.

The fighter went up but the pilot seemed to make no effort to eject. *Um . . . what is wrong with these people?*

Two beams struck her on the side, absorbed by her shields. Alicia turned to meet them, heading straight for them. She'd hoped to intimidate them but instead, they picked up speed and stopped firing. *They're going to ram me . . . That's definitely the look of someone who plans to ram me.*

Alicia dropped the game of chicken, hitting her top thrusters to send her out of their range. They didn't bother to follow, instead fixating on their next potential target. One of them clipped a Charger fighter, catching them on the side. Both went spinning out of control but the

Earth ship managed to recover.
The scavenger vessel slammed into the station, exploding in a spectacular fashion. When the globular flames cleared, a jagged hole was left behind, cascading debris from the station into space before some automated emergency system erected a force field. Half the station could've become decompressed in that short time.
I hope the marines are okay. Another attacker came upon her, firing away before darting off. He didn't even seem interested in following up, rather he continued on a new course out of the conflict altogether. *Is he fleeing? Repositioning? These pilots are completely insane! There's no rhyme or reason to their tactics*.
Scans showed more fighters coming in but this time, the silhouettes were very familiar. Tol'An, ready to get into the action. But who would they attack? The scavengers? Mustang? Alicia wondered how insane they would be and if the affliction was something to worry about. She jammed her afterburners to full, taking herself well out of the action for a moment.
"We have more incoming," Alicia said. "Looks like . . . six Tol'An vessels on intercept course." She looked about the environment, trying to decide the best course of action. The debris field was not too far off from where the other fighters did battle. The erratic flight patterns might even be used to their advantage.
She ran a quick scan of the area, noting that it was not as dense as she initially thought. "I've got an idea," Alicia called to the others. "Um . . . hold tight while I give this a try."
"What're you doing?" Dennis asked. "Don't do something insane, Alicia. I'm serious."
"It's not too insane," Alicia replied. "Besides, it'll buy you some breathing room, which you very well might need if they decide to close in on the Gnosis." She tapped the computer, setting waypoints so she could follow them into the debris field then . . . she sent herself hurtling toward the nearest enemy fighters.
Just gotta get your attention, Alicia thought. *Then we'll see if you can clear your heads long enough to survive a little fancy flying*.

***

Fielding struggled to get ahold of the marines but through the static, only screams were audible in the static. Strange war cries and horror peeked through, chilling his blood each time it became more distinct. The computer couldn't translate the words, but they weren't merely inarticulate sounds. There were distinct syllables, each horrifying and rough.

What the hell am I even hearing?

Camera feeds also died.

"Fielding," Vincent's voice made him jump, "we've got a lot going on suddenly. Have you been able to reach the marines yet?"

"Negative," Fielding replied. "Maybe we should go out there and get them."

"Under no circumstances will anyone be going to that station now," Vincent said. "We can't trust our eyes. I'm about to have the doctor start looking into what's going on. It's a miracle we're not having more problems over here. Have you been able to reach the shuttles? They're not responding to hails either."

"No, and the last contact I had was with team one. Team two dropped off shortly after they arrived at the station proper." Fielding sighed. "So what is happening, Commander? What are we not seeing?"

"A debris field, for one," Vincent replied. "Couple that with God knows what on the station . . . At least a hundred life forms, maybe more. We didn't pick any of that up when we first arrived so there you go. Welcome to the unknown part of our investigations, huh?"

"Before I lost contact, team one was forced to kill some of the Pahxin technicians. They were attacked . . . and their opponents wouldn't stand down, wouldn't surrender." Fielding paused for a moment. "Do you think this problem might . . . I don't know . . . impact behavior?"

"The dogfighting I'm seeing would indicate yes. The enemy pilots have no regard for their personal safety. It's bad, Fielding. Keep trying to reach your people. We have to get them off of there . . . then quarantine them until we know what's happened."

"Understood." That last bit annoyed Fielding but he understood the

precaution. They had no idea what those men encountered in the station and if it was some kind of disease, then that would lead to many more lives being risked. He tried again to reach them, shifting channels, working to clean up the signal but he still had no luck.
Sitting back, Fielding ran his hands over his head and as he considered giving up, a long shot came to him. Voice communication was down but maybe he could send a far simpler signal. Their HUDs should be able to interpret Morse code, even if they didn't know it right away. It might be the only way to get through.
Composing a quick message, Fielding set the computer to send it continuously until they received a reply. He followed up with a request to engineering to have a technician look into what might be causing the interference. With any luck, they'd have a response soon.
He fought against rising frustration.
Two full teams were at risk over there and if they couldn't be reached, they might all be lost. Fielding couldn't let himself think like that, couldn't indulge the pessimism. Not when there was even a glimmer of hope.

***

Combatants piled into the next module, cutting off the marine's path to the other shuttle. Vine and Anderson took either side of the door. Kelly and Brock crouched with their weapons aimed at the entrance. Erskin and Bosh guarded their rear. Gillet stood ready to support either side.
Heat tried to get through to the Gnosis again, reaching out to Fielding. More static. His head started aching just before he found the blood and it finally started to lighten up. None of the others complained about the pain. An epiphany struck him, a thought about the Orb. It must've had something to do with it.
My contact with it . . . That insane vision it gave me . . . That's what drew me to the blood and the recording. Heat wondered if it would help him anymore. *Anything would be welcome at this point. Knowing my luck, my next inspiration will draw us directly into the middle of some enemy camp*

on this godforsaken facility.

People on the other side of the door began chanting, some kind of staccato war cry that grew in volume and intensity. They started speaking, escalated to shouts them screamed until they made inarticulate noise. Heat looked at Gillet, feeling at a loss for words. The enemy's sounds must've been meant to intimidate and it started working, at least on Bosh.

"Maybe we should fall back," Bosh offered. "I'm sure we could find a way around them."

"We stand here," Heat said. "We'll finish them and push on. There's no time to dally with the shuttle. We have to get there or we're done. Do you all get me? Stay focused. When that door opens, you fire and you do *not* let them get very far. This module is our home and they're about to invade it. Don't tell me any of you are okay with them coming into your territory."

The men shouted their agreement, a brief cry of solidarity. Heat hoped it would be enough to keep their morale until they finished the fight. If those on the other side of the door held clubs and blades, the fight would be easy. If they were armed with beam weapons, it held a certain amount of danger.

But one way or another, Heat and his men were going that way and nothing in that station would stop them.

The doors burst open. Shouts filled the air. Men flooded into the room, carrying melee weapons as they'd seen before. Four of the marines immediately opened fire, tearing through the front line of their attackers. Bodies hit the ground, pieces of flesh and clothes splattered the wall or hovered briefly before slapping the floor.

Heat had no idea how many they killed before the next wave approached, this one using beam weapons. They only barely started to fire when the whole station shook violently. Heat lost his balance, slamming his back against the wall. The others stumbled but kept their footing. Hostilities were temporarily halted when the lights flickered.

Holy God, this is insane! Heat checked his HUD, thanking whatever divine power had his back for the fact that his scans were working.

Something collided with the station, tearing a hole in the hull seven modules away. Automated maintenance kicked in, dropping a force field in place but that section of the station lost all compression. Oxygen levels started to rise, albeit slowly. *We'd be okay in the armor*, Heat thought, *but these maniacs running around would've died instantly*.

As if on cue to his thoughts, the beams lit up again. Marines moved to take cover, returning fire. The doors opened beside Heat and a man slipped in, carrying a makeshift blade out of sharpened shards of metal. He lifted it over his head and charged. Heat hit him in the face with the butt of his weapon, knocking the man instantly unconscious. *I need this guy alive.* Heat turned to Gillet. "We have to fall back. Bring this guy with us."

"Why? He looks dead!"

"I knocked him out and I've got questions!" Heat simmered for half a moment before regaining full control of himself. "Listen, we don't have time to argue. We're bringing him, we're falling back, we're learning more about the situation. Guys! Fall back, two at a time, cover fire! We're locking down the next module!"

It was clear Vine wanted to argue but he had to stop when he took a blast to the leg. Crying out, he stumbled back but it looked like he was no worse the wear. A black scorch marked the front of his thigh and that was the extent of the damage. No melting, no corrosion. He fell back with the others.

Gillet grabbed the downed captive and they escaped to the next room, just as the others surged forward. They were rewarded with a final barrage of bullets before the doors closed, giving them another moment of respite. "Lock those down!" Heat barked. "And give me some space. I want to know how these assholes got here . . . and what happened specifically."

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Chapter 7

Christina crouched behind a low console as bullets glanced off the wall six inches above her head. She reloaded her weapon, thinking back to the brief moment not even twenty minutes earlier when their mission moved from stealth operation to full on loud firefight with an unknown number of men.

They found the base, nestled neatly between two peaks in the middle of the mountains. Scans indicated it was deserted but their first glimpse told them that was wrong. Guards stood at the top of the building, staring out in four directions and dim lights reflected out of the windows.

How did we miss those from aerial? Christina wondered about their methods for collecting intel. *If I survive this, I'm running them through the paces to figure out what happened specifically*.

The base itself sported walls on the sides flanked by mountains, which were attached to the base spanning across from one side to the next. Three buildings extended two stories down and three up. Scans indicated the walls were electrified with doors providing access to the various paths around the area, likely for scouting patrols.

They didn't encounter any people on their descent but when they arrived, there was a man standing outside. He lingered around a solid metal door, staring off to the left. Christina took aim, engaging the silencer on her submachine gun. Clicking it to single fire mode, she zeroed in on his head and depressed the trigger.

The gun whisper-clicked and the man jerked in place before collapsing to the ground. Christina and Essex dashed forward, right up to the door. They obscured the body with some snow before she began to hack into the security system. "Cover me." She turned to her tablet while her partner stood guard.

Wind picked up, blowing snow all about them. Weather reports suggested they didn't have to worry about snow but mountains didn't always cooperate with meteorology. When the cool breeze buffeted her back, she sensed a change. It worried her because if a storm came

up, if it escalated, the shuttle might not be able to pull off a clean extract.

We'd be stuck down here with God knows how many enemies? Christina stepped back as the door opened. "We're in."

"Thank God," Essex muttered. "It's cold as a witch's tit out here."

"Charming." Christina directed him to go first. "I'll get the door."

Once the door closed and the wind stopped, they found themselves in an eerily silent chamber. The change in temperature made her start to sweat. Each of them surveyed their surroundings. It was a guard room, complete with locked up weapons and security terminals hooked into cameras all throughout the base.

"This could be useful," Essex said. "Maybe grab personnel data? Find what we're looking for right from here?"

Christina looked over the computer, scanned it with her tablet. She shook her head. "These are dummy stations. They have access to the cameras but no elevated permissions. Their network access is restricted at the hardware level. We're going to have to make our way to their control room."

"And what are we looking for there?"

"Intel," Christina replied. "Whether it be personnel files, communiques or full on military plans. It really depends on how sloppy they were with their security. I've seen people make some insanely bad decisions before. However . . ." She tapped a button on the terminal and brought up a different set of cameras on the screens. "We've got some things to get through."

The courtyard beyond the guard station showed at least four men walking around. They seemed to be on some sort of security rotation but they didn't just move back and forth. Each of them zigged and zagged in the open, crossing paths and acknowledging one another. Taking them out would've required popping all of them at once. Impractical to say the least.

"How're we going to slip through?" Essex asked. "Do you want to go out shooting? We've got suppressors."

"No," Christina said. "We're good shots, but I don't want to risk a miss. We've got to be smart about this. When we go out, we'll take a

hard right and go to the wall. Wait for them to cross at the middle and run. If we're at all lucky, we'll reach the next building before we're seen. If not . . ." She sighed. "I guess we shoot them and hope for the best."

"That sounds fine to me." Essex stepped over to the door leading into the courtyard. "You want me to take point?"

"Not this time," Christina replied. "Follow my lead, please. I'll get us out there and to the wall. Then, sprint like hell, okay?" She sized him up. "I'm guessing you're a little faster than I am. Don't knock me over when you start moving. Whoever gets to the wall first will turn around and cover the other person in the event that we're seen. Got it?"

"I'm in."

Christina watched the screen until the men met at the middle. She opened the door and slipped out, moving swiftly toward the end of the building. They arrived at the wall, pressed into the corner. It should've been a reasonable blind spot but she didn't want to risk it for long. The two of them crouched there, allowing the patrol to reach the extent of their perimeter.

The men moved back toward one another, starting another rotation. This time, they broadened their pattern, staying closer to the walls. Christina noticed they were each hugging themselves, slapping their arms and stomping their feet as they walked. She figured they must've been out there for at least the better part of an hour.

And they're probably pretty miserable as a result. Miserable people made mistakes, they didn't pay close attention. That meant the next part of the plan should work. As soon as the four individuals returned toward their center, Christina made a quick dash for the next building, sprinting as fast as her legs would carry her.

To her right, the frosty metal wall extended some twelve feet above her while the guards and open courtyard sat to her left. Their destination, the next building, was a mere forty feet ahead. Her legs and lungs began to ache. Adrenaline made her vision blur. Heavy breathing sounded in her ears, competing with the pounding of her heart.

Christina reached the wall, sliding on her knees into cover. She spun, aiming her weapon while Essex caught up. He passed her by, slowing to a walk. A side door provided access another fifty yards down, a secure passage the soldiers might've used back when a real army held the place.

This group was squatting. They probably didn't know all the ways in and out. How long did they intend to stay and more importantly, when did they plan to leave? Where would they go? These were the questions that needed answering before they left the facility. And if there was a storm, they might have plenty of time to search. Providing they weren't discovered.

Slipping into the larger structure proved no more difficult than the first door, though it opened far slower from lack of use. The cold and years were not particularly kind to the facility, a fact that was made all the more obvious by the state of the first room they entered. Frost clung to the walls, and the empty shelves were covered in rust.

Did they upgrade the technology? If this room is in such a state, then nothing should've worked from the time when the actual military used it.

They crept into a dark hallway. Broken light fixtures lined the walls, up to a single door that happened to be blessedly free of frost. Christina did a scan, showing Essex that there were people on the other side. *We've found the part of the base they're actually using*. She checked and the door was unlocked. *And they don't think anyone can get in this way*.

Moving inside, they found themselves in a large room filled with banks of computers and cables draped across the floor. Most of it was brand new but a few built in consoles were in use. Christina counted fifteen people milling about, all working at different stations throughout the room.

Their low chatter masked the sound of the door opening and none of them even looked in that direction. *This probably has what we need,* Christina thought. *But there's no way we're blending in here*. Two exits presented themselves. Less people stood near the room to the right but that might've meant the left held more valuable, actionable intel. Christina ultimately elected to go to the right. They slipped through

the next door and found themselves in a dark space full of whirring computers. *This is a server room. Jackpot!* She headed left, moving close to one of the nearby consoles. “Hey,” she whispered. “I’m pretty sure this is exactly what we need. Keep an eye on the door.”

“What do I do if someone comes in?”

“Hope they don’t have a flashlight,” Christina replied. Their helmets provided them with night vision and she could easily see the panel she needed to remove. Whoever built the boxes used a tool-less design, allowing her to remove the section without a screwdriver. It revealed all the internals and a place to plug in.

She fished a dongle from her belt and plugged her tablet in, ordering it to download all the data available. A meter appeared, showing her it would take seven minutes to finish. *Oh my God! That’s an eternity!*

“What’s wrong?” Essex asked. “You just went stiff.”

“The initial estimated time to download this stuff is long,” Christina replied. “I’m hoping it’s wrong and goes down. Even if it doesn’t though, I’d say we scored big. Providing we can get it out of here, we’ll probably have everything we need about these guys.”

Why would it take so long if you’re hard wired in?” Essex shook his head. “It seems fishy.”

“I think it’s just a ton of data.” Christina hummed. Even as she said it, she began to doubt. She had to remind herself of Occam’s Razor: the simplest explanation tended to be the correct one. Poorly optimized, large data sets made more sense than these people having some kind of amazing security tech in place.

After all, they didn’t even bar the outside doors nor did they guard large sections of the facility.

It took forever, but the data did finish downloading after nearly ten minutes. No one even peeked their heads inside to look around. The server room appeared to be both off limits and a place without cameras. Christina checked, noting another door on the far side of the room.

She elected to try that one instead of going back the way they came. Chances were good someone would be standing around out there and she didn’t want to risk it. Heading across the space and performed a

quick scan. One person showed up on the far left nearly sixty yards away.
They stepped through the door and went to the right, heading for another hallway.
Christina rounded the corner but Essex was a few feet behind her.
“Hey!” A voice sounded from the end of the hall, making Christina’s stomach drop. “What’re you doing there? What’s going on?”
Essex took aim and fired, putting a round in the man’s face at fifty yards. The body hit the deck, making a clang sound on the metal grating. Doors opened at the end of the hall as people came out to see what happened. Christina grabbed Essex and they hurried off, trying to make it back toward the unused part of the base.
As they came to the next door, it opened before they could get there and three men stepped out. Each of them expressed shock at seeing the two spies and Christina opened up, throwing a couple quick bursts into them. Their bodies danced backward, hitting the walls before dropping dead.
An alarm went off.
“Shit.” Christina sighed, tapping her com. She reached out to the shuttle. “We need an immediate evac. Give me a good location to meet you.”
“I’m two minutes out,” the pilot said. “Did you just alert the base?”
“Affirmative,” Christina said. “Hurry up. I don’t have time to tell you a story. Where can you get us?”
“They have anti-aircraft down there. You’ll have to get to the coordinates I just sent you. Half a mile from the base.”
“God damn it.” Christina clenched her fist but she didn’t argue. “Okay. We’ll see you soon. Don’t leave without us.” She motioned for Essex to follow her. “This is where the rest of our trip gets damn exciting. I hope you’re ready.”
“Shouldn’t be too much of a problem,” Essex said. “They’re not ready for what we’ve got to throw at them.”
Christina really wanted to argue that with him but it wasn’t the time. She led him out through the next room and toward their escape route, the abandoned part of the base. The door opened and they stepped

into the hallway with the broken light fixtures. Guns went off, bullets slapping the walls all around them.
Essex returned fire. Things went into chaos. They started running, driven away from their planned route. Deeper into the base they fled, engaging in a running gun battle. Essex took a grazing shot to the arm. Christina's helmet got a nick from a particularly lucky shot but they got into a reactor area where they could take cover behind the low protective rails.
Christina reloaded her weapon as someone fired at her, putting rounds into the wall just opposite the catwalk. She leaned out and shot back, counting five people closing on their position. "Change of plan," she used the com to reach their pilot. "I'm going to need you to risk those anti-aircraft guns."
"Are you insane?" He asked. "If I get shot down in there, then we're all dead!"
"If you don't try, then we're likely not going to make it out of here," Christina said. "And believe me, the information I have in this tablet is worth the risk. Now get your ass moving. Stay low and they'll have a hard time targeting you. Once you're close, we'll come out and we can make a running extract. Copy?"
"Copy," the pilot grumbled, sounding incredibly pissed. "Just be ready, agent. This sounds insane."
"That's kind of our job description," Christina replied. "Yours included. I'll keep the line hot." She shouted to Essex. "You still okay?"
Another bunch of gunfire blasted the walkway beside her, slapping the wall again. It made her stay put in her cover.
Essex stood and fired several long bursts before returning to his own cover. "I'm good! Reloading!" He dropped the magazine and slapped another one in.
"Cease fire!" shouted one of the attackers, and the shooting did indeed stop. He spoke with a Slavic accent though Christina couldn't immediately place the region of origin. "You're both surrounded. There is no way out. Whatever you hoped to achieve in breaking in has failed. Surrender! Or you'll be killed."

Christina checked for the shuttle's location. He was still a good minute out. *Time to stall.* "What're you doing here?" She called back. "This isn't exactly a vacation spot and the people who built it took off years ago. Care to explain?"

"That is none of your concern! Are you here to investigate our secrets?"

"We just got lost and thought we'd take a look around," Christina replied. "If it's all the same to you, we'd like to go out the way we came in. We can let bygones be bygones. You know. Water under the bridge or whatever. Just . . . step back and let us go. I promise we won't tell anyone about you squatting here."

"I want to know who you work for! Surrender!"

Damn, he's getting forceful. Christina noted the shuttle would be there in less than thirty seconds. They'd have to get to the edge of the base to board the thing and that meant giving the enemy a decent target to shoot at. Then she remembered all the grenades Essex brought. She turned to him and motioned toward his belt.

"We'll probably need those in a second," Christina said. "When we make a break for it."

"Understood."

"I'll tell you what," Christina shouted. "We're going to think about your surrender option for a moment. Is that okay? Decide how badly we want to live? Can you give us that time?"

"No!" The man grunted before continuing. "I don't know what game you're trying to play with me here but I'm not having it! Throw down your weapons *right now* and come out! I will not ask again! In fact . . ." He lowered his voice, giving orders to the men around him. "My men are coming to confiscate your equipment."

The rumble of the shuttle engine sounded overhead. Half a moment later, an explosion shook the ground followed by another. Christina held her breath, praying she'd just heard the destruction of the anti-aircraft guns rather than their ride but when the thrusters engaged, relief washed through her.

"Throw those grenades," Christina said. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

Essex tossed two grenades and immediately primed two more. They went sailing through the air, bouncing on the metal before exploding seconds later. People screamed. Others ran. The explosions helped foster chaos. Christina led the way toward the courtyard, firing her weapon to suppress the enemies nearby.

They got out in the open, near the taller buildings. The shuttle's turrets blasted away, swiveling about as it drove back hordes of enemy soldiers. "We're on our way!" Christina shouted. "Get the back open! Now!"

The shuttle spun around and dropped the ramp. Beam weapons started tearing through the air, a clear indication that this particular enemy had a benefactor beyond anyone on Earth. Christina felt something hot graze her left leg and it almost took her down. Essex cried out. She glanced back, but he was still moving.

They arrived at the shuttle. Christina jumped, dragging herself inside before turning to help Essex. He grabbed her hand, straining to hoist himself inside. Once his upper half was in and only his legs dangled out, she turned to tell the pilot to go. A strong hand grabbed her leg, threatening to yank her out.

She grabbed the safety handle of the shuttle and clung to it just as one of the enemies pulled himself up and into the shuttle.

"Go!" Christina shouted, rolling to her feet. The invader, a tall man with curly black hair and several days of facial hair, looked like a beast. His uniform was unkempt, wrinkled and wet from the snow. He didn't have any weapons, just his balled fists and a wild look in his eyes. He advanced.

Christina lifted her weapon but he threw a circle kick, knocking it out of her hand. The sling kept it attached to her body. Before she could recover from the attack, he danced forward and threw a punch, connecting with her jaw and neck. Had the gun not pulled her off balance, he might've broken a bone. Pain lit up her senses but it didn't slow her down.

She retaliated, not giving him a moment to think he'd made progress. Leading with a thrust kick, he dodged to the right. His retaliation came from another punch but this time, she was prepared and ducked,

coming back up with his arm over her shoulders. He stood on her left. She grabbed his fist with her left hand, holding him in place.
He tried to pull away and she let him go, accompanying the motion with a swift elbow to the chin. It knocked him backward onto the ground. Before he could rise, she kicked him on the thigh. He shoved at her legs, driving her back so he could crawl into a crouch. Diving forward, he tried to tackle her but she stepped aside so only one arm went around her waist.
They toppled to the ground and he slid, nearly falling out of the shuttle. Essex grabbed Christina's arm and pulled, keeping her from going out. The man struggled, screaming at the top of his lungs. Christina drew her free leg back and kicked him in the face, pounding him three times before his grip finally loosened.
Blood matted his beard, his eyes swelled shut but he still clung to her, however loosely. A final blow from her boot sent him tumbling out of the shuttle to his death somewhere in the mountains.
"Jesus Christ . . ." Christina slumped back on the floor. "Close the door. It's colder than shit in here."
Essex complied then flopped into one of the chairs. "Is this how it always goes?"
"Nah," Christina said from the floor. "Sometimes it's way worse. Though at this very moment, I'm not sure how. Did you get hurt?"
"Shot to the shoulder," Essex replied. "Seems the tactical armor prevented serious damage. I think it's just burned."
"We'll be back at Gamma Alpha soon enough and they can look at both of us." Christina turned to her tablet and patted it. "Hopefully, we got everything we need to deal with these terrorist assholes because I do *not* want to go through something like that again. Next time someone faces those jerks, it'll be the military."
"They seemed well armed for a faction group," Essex pointed out. "You think they've been outfitted by some other force?"
"I guarantee it." Christina crawled to her feet and sat on one of the chairs, tossing her weapon in the seat beside her. "Now to find out who did it and shut them down. But that's not for us to deal with, Essex. Good job. You definitely had my back out there. I appreciate

it.”
“I feel like I made a lot of mistakes.”
“We’ll worry about a full evaluation when we’re home and safe.”
Christina closed her eyes. “For now, I’m going to pretend I don’t have this job. Talk to you when we get back, Essex. Thanks again.”

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Chapter 8

Alicia thought her plan might be partially successful in that she could get two or three enemy ships to follow her. When five of them started chasing, she wondered how she became so popular. Two Tol'An ships and three scavenger vessels pursued her toward the debris field, each one firing erratically while buzzing behind her like insane bees.

"Are you luring them into the field?" Dennis asked. "Alicia, that's insane!"

"So are they," Alicia said. "So I'll be in good company . . . for so long as it takes them to crash and burn."

"Have you thought about the possibility that *you* might crash and burn?"

"Nah, never have considered that as a likely event." Alicia stretched her neck before tilting her head in focus. "If you don't mind, sir, I really need to concentrate for the next few moments so . . . I'll talk to you when I get out on the other side. Quinn out for now." She switched off the com just seconds before entering the boneyard.

One thing about space felt unnatural to Alicia and that involved light. Dropping into a canyon, pulling off wild maneuvers back on Earth for the aerial show, meant plunging into shadow. But things were either visible or not in her new environment and had it not been for her HUD highlighting the debris, it would've blended in completely.

The space station cast a massive shadow over the trashed vessels and rocks, making it feel like flying beneath a black blanket. Her pursuers didn't slow down and their weapons provided the only light in the area. Each time they fired, damaged chunks of metal faded into view momentarily.

Alicia dropped one of her missiles and increased speed, detonating it a few moments later. The explosion stirred up the bits of rock, scattering them into a web. The enemy pilots plunged through them, their shields handling the majority of the damage but the last one collided with a detached bulkhead.

The resulting explosion from his vessel stirred up half the boneyard in

that sector, sending the pieces in every direction. Several would hit the station, others would be cast off into deep space to burn up on some planet light years away. It had no impact on Alicia just yet but she had a long way to go.

The first few kilometers were fairly easy. She veered casually around the worst of it and let the shields burn up smaller chunks. The deeper she went, the worse it became until she was in a constant state of motion, dropping below a large rock, veering left to avoid a ship module then spinning around a cluster of old ordnance.

Something whacked her hard enough to make the ship drop a good ten feet and she had to compensate, nursing the thrusters for increased control. Her pursuers struggled. Another one slammed into something and his blip disappeared from her scanner. Another one tried to climb, to depart the hazard but was crushed between two rocks.

Two remained and Alicia had no idea how they survived other than sheer luck. They were flying like total maniacs and yet somehow managed to get that far. She was approaching the end of the boneyard where she'd emerge into open space again. Clicking on her com, she reached out to all available pilots.

"Anyone on this channel still? Cause . . . I kinda need some help."

"Oh, now you need help, huh?" Dennis asked. "I have your position. Looks like two survived your little stunt run."

"Yeah, and no one's more surprised than me," Alicia grunted, pulling up sharply before flipping sideways. The bottom of her ship skimmed a rock, shields flaring so brightly it nearly blinded her. As she came free from the object, she saw open space not even ten seconds away.

"I'll admit it. This was a bad idea."

"Thank God it was educational."

Alicia saw the approaching Mustang fighters on her scanner. They'd be there, but it wouldn't be in time to catch the enemy as they came out of the debris field. She'd have to hold them off . . . or at least survive for reinforcements. When none of the obstacles appeared to be big enough to cause real damage, she hit her afterburners.

Tiny sparks appeared all over the hull, bits of debris burning up as she passed through them. Outside, she drew a deep breath and let it out.

Sweat made her clothes cling uncomfortably, making her desperately wish the cockpit wasn't so tight around her. Much as she loved flying, this aspect made her miserable.

The enemies came trundling out of the debris field, each redirecting their course to chase her down. One was Tol'An, the other a scavenger. *Interesting. Do they have a temporary truce?* Alicia increased speed but it was obvious they'd have a firing solution shortly. *Okay, time to stop running*.

Dropping speed, she engaged her maneuvering thrusters and spun in place, rocketing back toward the enemy ships. She fired her beam weapons, rapidly depressing the trigger as she approached. One on the left veered away but the Tol'An ship maintained course, returning fire. Their blasts hit each other, causing shields to react. Alicia's defenses held, the Tol'An's did not. A purple field seemed to crack around the ship, bursting a moment later like shattering glass. Alicia switched to guns, firing a short burst before they passed by one another, blurs in space.

"You hit him," Dennis said. "Looks like there's a fire in the nose but . . . wait. What the hell is he doing?"

Alicia turned sharply to look. The Tol'An vessel attacked the scavenger, attempting to ram him. *What the fresh hell?* The two ships danced around but the pursuer proved to be far more maneuverable. He slammed into his target, connecting with the rear. Both crafts went up in a spectacular display, fading out a moment later.

"That . . . was incredible," Alicia said. "I don't know what to say."

"Form up," Dennis replied. "We're heading back toward the Gnosis to wait for orders. We can have another talk about foolhardy behavior when we're on our way home."

"I look forward to that," Alicia muttered, spinning around to join the formation. Whatever impacted the people near that station pushed them not only to insanity but removed their sense of self-preservation as well. They'd encountered zealots before just never quite like that. Their opponents didn't seem to want to win so much as cause chaos. A task they managed quite nicely.

***

General Trall went through the Tol'An resources, working through the logistics of an attack on the human planet of Earth. He needed more intelligence, a better understanding of the opposition they might face. Rumor had it there were spies operating on the planet but he didn't have access to them yet.

I need to know what we're facing there. They have several of the Trindishas. That could mean they have considerable defenses, the kind we might not be capable of easily breaching. They already failed in one attack but he believed hubris to be involved that time. This assault would be very different.

Pahxin forces might be there to defend them, meaning they could count on a major battle above the planet. He'd faced his former brothers before in battle and done quite well, so he was less concerned about them. His worry involved the ground forces and the humans' ability to repel them.

"Sir," one of the soldiers stepped into the room and handed him a tablet. "Report on recent operations. We've lost contact with a ship sent off five days ago. I thought you should know."

"Thank you." Trall took it from him, peering down at the information. It was a fast-moving vessel, large enough for twenty men with plenty of cargo space for spoils. The coordinates they were en route to seemed familiar. He couldn't quite place why but doing a crosscheck with other operations instantly brought something up.

The destroyer Ezria sent to collect the Orb went there. He wondered if it had already arrived and if they'd be able to reach it on communications. They needed to know what they were getting into, realize that other Tol'An had gone missing. Without that information, they very well might find themselves in trouble.

Trall stormed into his command center. "I need you to open a channel to the Dormant Star. Now."

"Yes, sir." The officer on duty tapped at his console, trying to send a message. He sighed before turning around. "I'm sorry, sir. It appears they are in hyperspace at the moment. I'm getting no response."

“Perfect.” Trall scowled. “What about this smaller ship? The Venture? Raise them.”
“We’ve been trying . . . They haven’t responded in days. They’re currently listed as missing in action. A rescue operation was planned but Lord Ezria canceled it as too risky.”
“I doubt he knew where they were.” Trall rubbed his eyes. The Master had great vision for the overall future of the galaxy, for all governments but his grasp of everyday logistics left something to be desired. “Okay . . . I want you to keep trying the Dormant Star. Set up an automated message to let them know we need them to contact us the moment they arrive.”
“Understood.”
Trall left the room, returning to his office. He wondered if it might be in their best interest to head out to that place himself, with a large enough force to deal with whatever might be out there. If the Pahxin held the area or even the Kalrawv Group, he would need to deal with them decisively.
He sat down and checked the roster of ships currently orbiting the planet. He had his flagship, a battleship stolen from the Pahxin as well as ten destroyers and a number of scouts. If they left right away, they might be able to plot an efficient enough course to save their people and possibly salvage the mission.
Trall hit the com, blasting a general communication to his command staff. “Prepare my shuttle for departure,” he said. “I’ll be heading to the flagship immediately. Have navigation start plotting a course to these coordinates. I want it efficient, something that will get us there as swiftly as possible. We have men to save.”
He didn’t wait for a response before clicking it off. They would tend to his things and ensure they were onboard. There wasn’t time to lose. He headed out, moving toward the hangar and what he hoped would be a win for his people. Considering what Gizan had done, they needed one desperately.

***

Salina and Doctor Holland worked together to analyze what might be happening on the station. At first glance, it did not appear to be a medical problem but they couldn't be sure without data. Losing contact with the marines meant their access to samples was impossible. Even the shuttles were not responding.

Cassie went through the audio files from the pirates while performing scans. She seemed to be able to pull information still and offered up what data she could while multitasking. Salina found it frustrating that their only pipeline to gather much needed intelligence rested firmly on the shoulders of only two people.

Gil helped by performing scans as well, trying to offer advice while presenting his findings. Though he could also clearly see the scan data, it wasn't all encompassing of the environment they were trying to analyze. Air samples and blood samples would've been ideal. Neither were available.

"We need to get over there," Doctor Holland said. "Much as I don't want to say that and sure as hell am not volunteering, without direct contact, we'll never figure this out."

"Unless it has nothing to do with the oxygen," Gil said. "The technicians who came to restore this station would've brought hazard equipment. They wouldn't have breathed the air nor been exposed to it while they explored the first time. And the marines are in there with their full armor on and we've seen signs of problems."

"That doesn't help," Salina said. "Because eventually, they *did* take those things off. Even with protection, they were tricked. Wait . . ." An epiphany hit her. "Tricked. Almost by an intelligence."

"What're you saying?" Holland asked.

"I'm thinking through this. Some *thing* has done this to the people who boarded the station. We can't tell if it's a contagion but we can start searching for unusual power readings. Something like those disembodied things we encountered at the temple. Remember that?" She looked at Gil. "You were there."

"Yes." Gil nodded. "I should be able to tweak the scanner to find something like that. I'll start now." He tapped away at the console before stepping back. "Oh my . . ."

“What?” Salina frowned at the screen. “You already did it? Did you find something?”
“I did . . . and yes.” Gil pointed to the monitor. “You should be able to see this as well.”
Salina narrowed her eyes, leaning close. The scanner picked up a low-level vibration impacting the entire station. It cast a field out around the base nearly six hundred yards in all directions. Any ship that docked with it would’ve been affected. She directed Holland to look at it.
“Would this have an impact on people?” Salina asked. “Even Pahxin?”
Holland nodded immediately. “Yes, it’s at a perfect frequency to cause problems with the nervous system. The sort of thing that Agent Alexander described from the pirates may only be one symptom of this type of low-level . . . noise for lack of a better term. Anywhere from mere annoyance to mania.”
“Which we’ve seen in the enemy pilots,” Gil pointed out. “However, it doesn’t merely end if someone leaves the field.”
Holland shook his head. “It would be like coming down from being angry or frustrated. It takes time and before they have the opportunity to shake the symptoms free, they subject themselves to the source again. I would not say that it’s permanent . . . but I’d have to study someone who experienced it to know.”
“What’s this reading?” Salina pointed to an energy spike deep within the station. “Cassie, you should look at this one too.”
Cassie joined them. Gil nudged her as she approached, saying, “that looks somewhat familiar to me . . . but different.”
“Yeah.” Cassie pointed. “That’s close to Orb energy but there’s something off about it. Something different. Like . . . Like something’s overlaid on top. A filter almost.”
“Or a cloud,” Holland said. “Because you’re right. Those signals are exactly what I was reading when we did the experiment only there’s something dampening the power.”
“That’s why I didn’t see it when we arrived,” Cassie pointed out. “Well . . . one of the reasons at least.”
“Something feeding on it,” Salina suggested. “Something thriving on

the power of the Orb. We need theories. Thoughts. Anything at all that could help them make sense of it." She turned to Gil. "What've you got?"
"If you look at this system, there are two dead planets," Gil said. "They have no life on them at all, zero activity. Without a survey, I'm guessing on the next part, but I'll bet they used to have settlements. I came up with that because of the debris field that we're now able to see. All that rock, the metal . . . the ships."
"You're thinking . . ." Salina nodded. "I see. You think one of the planets was destroyed."
"Yes. Possibly by whatever we're dealing with. It's transferred itself to the station somehow and there it exists, acting as . . . well, your old mythology calls them sirens. Bringing ships and additional people here."
Cassie added, "if that's the case, then whatever it is can't survive on the Orb's power alone."
"No, it must require some sort of living energy," Holland said. "Oh, but this is total conjecture. We're making it up."
"Even if we're off by a little bit," Salina replied, "it sounds plausible. Think about it. A technical crew shows up on the station and immediately goes missing. No one knows what happened to them. The Tol'An show up, they fly erratically when they engage our fighters and they haven't left with their prize. Then there are the scavengers and pirates as well."
Cassie returned to her station and brought up a scan. "Can you guys see this yet? It doesn't matter. I'll explain. Each faction you described, including ours, have been segregated into different parts of the facility. Our people are here," she pointed, "between where our shuttles docked. You can see large clusters in different ones elsewhere here and here."
Gil hummed, eyes narrow. "If this thing came from a planet with dozens of factions, then this would make sense. It would be used to warring entities. That might even be what it feeds on. I wish we could discover its origin specifically. Such a fascinating creature . . . but with the Orb here, I would be willing to bet it is a manifestation of

will."
"Contradictory wills," Cassie clarified. "Each intent on some kind of war that eventually destroyed their planet. When the planet was gone, somehow the station survived and now, this anomaly has hovered around the Orb, remaining alive to bring new victims and additional ships here. All to feed itself."
"And our people," Holland turned to the viewscreen, "are right in the thick of it."
"I'll work on the communications," Gil said. "I might be able to assist with getting through the interference."
Cassie sat down. "I've got the next audio file translated. I can read faster than he speaks. It'll only take a moment."
"Guys," Salina said, "just a thought. Would the Orb survive if the station went up?"
Gil took a step back. "As in, you are wondering what would happen if we *destroyed* the station?" He shook his head. "We might well destroy ourselves. If the Orb exploded, if its energy was released, we would all be dead. There'd be no outrunning it either. I would say that's not even a last resort here."
"Just checking," Salina replied. "Okay, we've got some work to do. Maybe we can find a way to cancel out these vibrations. Doctor Holland I will be on that. Good luck, everyone. I hope we can move quickly."

***

Cassie picked up where she left off with the audio file, pressing the earpiece against her head to block out noise around her. The pirates had been charging deep into the station, hunting down their attackers. Zahl grudgingly followed behind, unwilling to be left alone but just as concerned about what his crew might find.
***

Zahl's crew progressed through the modules the captain led them through earlier. They heard screams ahead. Men and women crying

out, chanting some sort of gibberish. It seemed to echo through the walls, coming from all directions. The chilling sound only intensified the further along they went.

Near the heart of the station, doors opened to the right and left. Men charged in, rapid firing their weapons. Even their wild aim managed to get lucky, taking two men down in an instant. Zahl threw himself backward, slamming into the door as he lifted his own weapon to retaliate.

The other pirates went wild, some of them throwing their weapons to the ground, others using their rifles as clubs. They went utterly savage, beating their opponents until they were little more than pulp. When it was all said and done, Zahl counted twenty-six of his compatriots still alive, each covered in blood.

Zahl didn't even have an opportunity to use his gun. He never had a clear line of fire throughout the engagement and now that it ended, the pirates looked like savages. They continued on their warpath, heading toward a white light through the next door. As they went, they began to chant, uttering the same gibberish as the foes they'd just killed.

"Um . . . hey . . ." Zahl trembled when he said the words, especially when one of his friends turned to look at him with wild, frenzied eyes. He swallowed hard, electing to remain quiet as they marched, heading into what had to be the very center of the station, one of the larger modules.

A massive globe occupied the center of the room, surrounded by a metal guardrail. Other individuals stood around it, arms raised in the air as they belted out screams, cries of adoration and exaltation. Total zealots, men, and women who lost their minds utterly as they worshipped the strange device.

The pirates joined them, offering up praise to the object. *Why aren't they fighting with each other?* Zahl saw no reason for it but the real question that terrified him, the thing he didn't want to voice, even to himself, was why he hadn't succumbed to the same madness as his crew.

What makes me special? Zahl turned to the object in the center of the

room. *And what exactly is that?* It felt familiar like he should recognize it from something but he struggled to think . . . to consider his past before boarding the station. *Something's happening. Only not like these poor bastards.*

Zahl directed his attention up. A black, nebulous void seemed to shimmer near the ceiling, tiny electrical bolts sparked in every direction. It filled him with dread, causing a film of cold sweat to cover his entire body. Mad fear threatened to overwhelm him but he mastered it. An idea came to him, one of total desperation.

I have to get back to the ship. One way or another, I'll find a way to launch it. When I get back to civilization, I'll sell the thing and never take to space again. Zahl backed toward the door, slipping into the hallway. The others didn't seem to pay any attention, ignoring him . . . at least for a time.

Zahl just reached the outer door when all the faces turned to him. They pointed, advancing slowly at first but they picked up the pace. Reaction took him. Zahl opened up with the rifle, tearing through several of them until he spent the magazine. He turned, running through the next station module while reloading his weapon.

***

Cassie leaned back, turning it off. Zahl made it clear he was going to die. His former crew must've found him. Heat discovered all that remained of the man. A splash of blood and his recording device. Her imagination ran wild as to what they might've done to him and she had to shake it off, forcing herself to consider something else.

Vincent touched her shoulder, making her jump. "Hey, it's just me . . . whoa. You're pale. What happened? Are you okay?"

Cassie shook her head. "I . . . guess. Yes. I'm fine." She drew a deep breath. "The Orb is there. In the middle of the station. It's . . . guarded . . . by . . . by maniacs."

"You'll have to explain that," Desmond replied.

"Wild people," Cassie said. "Affected by . . . this anomaly we're talking about. They're completely insane. Driven mad by it and

preserved to draw energy from them.” She sighed. “And it’s probably happening to our people over there too.”

“We can counter the vibrations,” Salina added, “but I’m not sure how well it will work so close to the source. Around it, maybe but right on top? I can’t say for sure.”

“Try anyway,” Desmond said. “I want those men back on the ship as soon as possible. Out of that influence. Good work, Cassie. I wish you would’ve had better news but at least we know. Keep pushing, folks. Lives are counting on what we do next. Make it count.”

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Chapter 9

Heat considered the roster of their second team. They were brand new to the Gnosis, but seasoned marines. He hadn't met any of them prior to when they boarded the ship. Most were eager, like Hendricks and Stellen. Each of them wanted to be there, to visit the unknown and defend humanity.

Their first time out, they suffered some kind of strange situation that might've ended them. Heat wanted answers and their prisoner might have them. The man wore the tattered remains of a Pahxin tech uniform. Sleeves were gone, pants were shredded and his cheeks were sliced open from just below the eyes to his jaw.

Blood covered him and not all of it was his own. They secured his hands in front of him. Vine held him in place while Gillet used some smelling salts to wake him up. The man jolted and immediately started struggling. Heat pressed his weapon against the man's forehead but it didn't slow him down, didn't even seem to catch his attention.

"That's not normal," Vine said. "He doesn't even care that you're holding a gun to him."

"He probably knows we won't murder him," Gillet replied.

"Listen up!" Heat barked, using all the command authority he could muster. "I know you think death doesn't matter, that it doesn't scare you but it should. Because we don't have to do it quick. We could make this take a while, just like your buddies in there with their knives and clubs. So answer my questions! What the hell is going on?"

"Gunny," Bosh said. "Door's secure but people are banging on it."

"Understood," Heat replied. He nudged the prisoner. "You still here? Answer me! What's going on? What's wrong with you people?"

The man began to foam at the mouth, jostling about from a sudden seizure. "Christ!" Gillet leaned in and gave him an injection. It slowed him down until he passed out, falling into a deep, sedated sleep. "Did you guys see that? He was moving around like . . . like he didn't care what happened to his bones."

“Why’d you knock him out?” Heat asked. He advanced on Gillet, clenching his fists. “I was questioning him, man.”
“Heat.” Gillet hesitated, letting out a sigh. “He was having a fit. He couldn’t talk anyway. What was I supposed to do? Watch him spasm until he broke his back? His neck? Is that what you were after?”
“I wanted answers.”
“You weren’t going to get them,” Gillet said. “Not from this guy. And I’m pretty sure you know that.”
Heat fumed, fighting back a wash of frustrated rage. Intellectually, he knew what was happening. He’d seen it in their opponents but he still struggled against it, wanted desperately to put his fist into Gillet’s face. Such feelings never came over him toward a fellow soldier, not with so much honest violence.
He paced away, forcing himself to think through it. As his agitation threatened him, it became more obvious in the men around him as well. *Am I the only thing holding these guys together?* The thought concerned him but made sense, in relation to his time with the Orb. *If that’s the case, then I have to keep a firm grip on my emotions*.
Taking several deep breaths, he felt himself calm and the body language of the men around him adjusted accordingly. *Wow. That’s incredible*. People still banged at the doors, trying to get in. Heat closed his eyes, thinking through the moment. *Our best path forward is to finish the mission*.
They got their hands on the Orb, they might even save the other people on board. Removing it from the base may just be the ticket . . . and he knew that was true somehow. In the back of his mind, it sounded correct. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be as simple as walking in and taking it.
The opposition would throw their lives away to stop them. He hadn’t seen such horde mentality before in all his career as a soldier. Their opponents seemed to believe they had an unlimited supply, that sheer numbers might prevail over superior firepower. The only problems they truly faced were the Tol’An . . . and potentially team two.
He didn’t want to think about that but it wouldn’t be denied as a terrible possibility.

“They’ve got cutting torches!” Vine shouted. “They’re cutting through the door!”
Heat lifted his weapon, aiming at the door. “Open it up then . . . and step aside.” Gillet stood beside him, preparing himself for the rush. The other marines did the same.
Sparks exploded from the bottom of the door but abruptly vanished as Vine opened it up. A surprised, wild eyed man looked up. He wasn’t even wearing eye protection, his face covered in tiny burns. Before he could do more than gasp, Heat loaded him up, three shots to the head. The body collapsed in a pool of blood. Enemies trampled the corpse, charging in with their melee weapons. The marines tore through them, blasting each one long before they could get within range. All told, they finished off seventeen combatants before they stopped coming.
Bosh cheered. “That’s right, you freaks! Get some of that!”
Something buzzed, a beam weapon from the other room. The blast caught Bosh in the back of the head, knocking him off balance and to the floor. “Contact!” Vine called, returning fire. A series of beam weapons went off. The marines took cover on either side of the door while taking shots back as they could.
“We can go around!” Gillet shouted. “Take the other door!”
Heat noted Anderson checking on Bosh. “How is he? Did he make it?”
“Life signs are nil,” Anderson said. “I think . . . Gah!” Two beams interrupted him, each connecting with the small of his back. He went down, his armor completely melted where he’d been hit.
Vine started toward him but Kelly stopped him, dragging him back toward the wall.
“Damn it.” Heat stepped out, firing a rocket into the next module where their attackers were held up. The ordnance hissed as it plunged into the room, exploding when it hit the wall. The door suddenly slammed shut as hair began to rush out from a hull breach. “Whoa! I did not expect that much damage!”
“Really?” Gillet shook his head. “A rocket in a space station wouldn’t open the wall?”
“Saved the day, didn’t it?” Heat moved over to check Anderson but he

was gone as well. Both he and Bosh were dead. Vine crouched by the bodies, head bowed. “Hey . . .” He put his hand on Vine’s shoulder. “We have to go, man. I know how it feels, believe me but it’s time to preserve the rest of the lives in the unit.”
Vine nodded, rising to his feet. They were down to Gillet, Kelly, Brock, Vine, and Erskin. Six men from ten. “We’ll come back for them when we’re ready to take off. Come on. We’ll go through this module over here. Oddly enough . . . I know the best way to get where we need to be.”
“Should we be worried about that?” Gillet asked.
“Yes, probably.” Heat shrugged. “But at least it’s something. I’ll take point.”

***

Cassie tapped Salina, gesturing to her screen. “Look at this. Do you see that power surge? That’s the thing creating the vibrations you’re trying to counter and . . . I cross-checked how it happened. Every bump coincides with a life sign winking out. A death. The fighting over there is making it more powerful.”
Salina frowned. “I thought this thing wanted people alive.”
“The seconds leading up to death might be like . . . an energy drink to it.” Cassie pinched the bridge of her nose. “Meaning it would be better to keep them alive but not entirely necessary, you see what I mean?”
“I do . . . So ceasing hostilities wouldn’t necessarily help.”
Cassie shook her head. “It will continue to feed on them normally *but* from what the pirate’s log said, it drives them to violence. It pushes them to hurt each other. Which is ultimately why it lures other ships here.”
“More fuel.” Salina tapped her com, bringing Doctor Holland on the line. “Do you have anything?”
“I’m working with Chief Webber on a device that *should* cancel out those vibration waves but it’s taking more time than we’d like. It needs an incredible amount of power. We’re trying to regulate that so it won’t just burn out within seconds. I’ll let you know when we have

something."
Salina cursed under her breath. "There you have it. Everything takes too much time."
Scanners started lighting up. Cassie and Salina both turned to their stations. A large ship emerged from hyperspace, closing swiftly with the station. "Captain!" Salina shouted, far more passionate than Cassie had ever heard her be before. "We have a Tol'An vessel entering the system, on intercept with the station."
"Because why not?" Desmond asked. He got on the com. "All hands to battle stations." He turned it off. "Zach, get the weapons going and move in to engage. We don't need to add more fuel to the fire on that station."
"Sir?" Vincent asked. "Wouldn't it help if they docked? We could take them out from there."
"Two problems with that," Desmond said. "First, we'd have a solid chance at taking the station out. Second, have you been listening to Salina and Cassie? More people would only feed whatever that thing is over there. The last thing we need is to make it more powerful. It could get to the point that it impacts us as well."
Vincent cleared his throat. "Understood. I'll get Raptor out there to help with fighters."
"Good call, get the rest of the pilots ready for round two." Desmond turned to Cassie. "If you've got any sort of stunning plan for getting the Orb and our people back, now's the time to pull it off. Give me a report on our newcomer. What's he like?"
"Destroyer," Salina said. "According to the Pahxin database, they can carry two dozen fighters. Crew of thirty, likely number of soldiers . . . anywhere from twenty to fifty depending on their tolerance for overloading."
"Probably high," Vincent muttered. "Considering who we're talking about."
"Won't matter when this is over." Desmond leaned back in his chair. "Hail them, Salina. Let's see if they feel like talking."
Cassie ran a scan over the vessel herself while Salina attempted to reach the Tol'An ship. They hadn't raised their shields yet but were

heading straight for the space station, moving at an alarming speed. It didn't seem like they would stop, nor even slow down. Did they intend to ram it?

Fighters deployed a moment later, ten in all. They raced in the direction of the Gnosis, forming up as they went. Their armaments appeared to be on par with others of their class, beams and regular shields. Something did stand out, a single missile on each. High yield explosives, which might've been capable of damaging the Gnosis if the shields were down.

Shuttles launched next, each one full of soldiers. They rocketed toward the station, three in all. Scans indicated they loaded up with eight men in each. Twenty-four troops hoping to secure the Orb. Considering what was happening there, their chances of success were incredibly low.

"They've warned us off," Salina said. "Recommended we leave the system immediately or we'll be destroyed."

"Lock weapons," Desmond said. "Zach, you can fire when we're in range."

"Captain," Cassie moved over to his chair, "they may be as blind as we were when we first arrived."

"Meaning?" Desmond asked.

"That they don't know about the boneyard or the fact that they're sending their soldiers into a station full of psychotic people doing God knows what."

"Ah . . ." Desmond rubbed his chin. "Interesting point. How dense is that debris field?"

"Bad," Salina said. "A large ship could not make it through there unscathed. Some of the larger pieces of rock alone are bigger than the Gnosis. Not to mention the fact that we're dealing with some pretty hefty pieces of ship. A few are mostly intact with terrible hull breaches. Probably what killed their crews."

"But there is an upper side to it, correct?" Desmond turned to look at Salina.

"Yes, sir . . . I don't follow the point?"

"Just this." Desmond gestured to the screen. "If we lure the enemy

ship close enough, we might get them to crash into it by trying to pursue us."
"How would we get them to follow?" Vincent asked. "They have no reason to bother with us if we don't try to stop them from boarding the station."
"We disable their shuttles with our fighters," Desmond replied, "and while that happens, we move to the field. I'm thinking you folks are good enough to deceive their scanners. Make them think we already have the Orb. Then, initiate a fake hyperdrive jump. Should get their attention."
"I'll get on it right now," Salina said. "Shouldn't be too difficult to make that happen."
"Zach, get us into position." Desmond smirked at Cassie. "You might need to help Salina. Vincent, give the pilots their new mission. Stopping those shuttles is key. If they get aboard, they'll detect the Orb is there. As long as they shoot those down, the Tol'An destroyer shouldn't last more than a few minutes."

***

Dennis led the fighters back toward the Gnosis, ready to board for the remainder of the mission. After being told to withdraw from the station, he figured they were done. When the enemy ship emerged from hyperspace, he groaned internally. That meant sane pilots, people with some self-preservation.
Fighters appeared on their screens first then moments later, three shuttles. Raptor emerged from the Gnosis, racing out to join them. *At least we'll have overwhelming odds,* Dennis thought. *Now to make that matter*.
"Dennis," Vincent's voice came through the com, "You guys need address those shuttles. They cannot be allowed to board the station. At all costs, those three *must* be disabled. Do you read me?"
"Understood, sir." Dennis checked his scan. "We'll have to haul ass to get there before they try. What's going on?"
"Captain's got a plan to handle that destroyer. Get to it. We'll be

keeping an eye out from here."
"Listen up, folks. New mission." Dennis let them know their objective. "Anna, take your Charger squadron up against the pilots. Dimitri, back her up. Mustang will deal with the shuttles. Any questions before we dive in?"
"Why the hell is he giving orders?" Flying Officer Carson Bright, Raptor Five asked the question. "Seems to me he has no right to be telling us what to do. He's not my direct commander."
"Stow it," Squadron Leader Dimitri Gerrit ran Raptor. "You know better than to be like that. Dennis has operational command. Follow our lead. We're going after those ships. Now be quiet."
"I don't like it," Carson insisted. "Screw that guy!"
"Consider yourself on report," Dimitri said. "Fall in line, now Raptor Five! I won't give you the order again."
Dennis didn't know Carson well but he'd never had problems with the man before. The fact he popped off didn't seem much like him at all. *What the hell is he thinking? I'll have him brought up on insubordination charges! Bastard.* Rage formed in his gut, spreading frustration until he felt on the verge of losing control.
"We're all on the same side here," Alicia said. "Save your attitude for the enemy, huh?"
"Shut the hell up, Quinn," Carson barked. "No one asked you."
"Dude . . ." Alicia lowered her voice. "You want to go a round, asshole?"
"Enough!" Anna stepped in. "Bickering at a time like this? You're all on report! Focus on the fighters. Dennis, I'll get our people where they need to be. Go for the shuttles. We have limited time before all of this is pointless. Come on." She engaged her afterburners, flying straight for the enemy ships.
Commentary ended but Dennis nursed his anger, still half tempted to turn on Carson and blast him a couple of times.
That thought finally dragged him out of the moment. Even considering an attack on a fellow flyer fell so far outside his normal paradigm, it broke through the rage and anger, casting it aside. *That didn't feel remotely natural.* He checked his scanner. They'd be on the

enemy shuttles inside two minutes at maximum speed.
Not enough time to investigate what just happened.
When Alicia threatened Carson, that hadn't been enough to push Dennis out of his anger. Ultimately, it didn't matter. He directed his ire toward the Tol'An shuttles, focusing on them. They could not be allowed to take the station, to board or dock. He engaged his beam weapons, sending a quick message to his team to focus all firepower on the nearest vessel.
Turrets popped out from the tops of the shuttles, firing blasts in their direction. Dennis dropped down to make it harder for them to target him. He depressed his trigger, tearing into the enemy's shields. The other ships of Mustang did the same, ripping through the enemy defenses in one run.
As they spun around, Dennis had them switch to guns and they blew the shuttle out of the sky. In the back of his mind, he recalled the order to *disable* the shuttles. Did the Gnosis intend for them to take prisoners? That didn't seem likely given the severity of the situation, of what they needed to do.
The next two shuttles attempted to fly evasively, moving erratically. Several of his people hammered the ship with missiles before following up with guns. Mustang Four, Lieutenant Kate Zeller, several direct hits from the turret as they came in for the kill. Her shields winked out and the enemy attack tore through her cockpit, causing the entire ship to go up.
"Kate!" Dennis shouted. He knew she didn't eject, saw clearly that her ship had been obliterated. Within a matter of seconds, there was nothing left. She'd been killed.
He turned his attention the shuttle in question. Its shields were down. He deployed a missile, watching it cut the distance between them in a few seconds before connecting with its target. The resulting explosion opened the back, sending the bodies of soldiers streaming out into space just as the rest of the vessel blew.
One left. "Tear that son of a bitch apart!" Dennis barely recognized his own voice, couldn't believe what he was hearing. He'd never sounded so intense, so savage before. It frightened him, not only of himself but

what pushed him so far. They'd lost pilots before. He never lost himself as a result.

Yet the other pilots under his command seemed to do the same. They unleashed hell on that final shuttle, hitting it with everything they had. The shuttle's turret was torn off by a spray of gunfire, then holes appeared on either side from two strafing runs by Mustang pilots. Bits of debris flew off in various directions.

The coup de grace came as Flying Officer Roman Mallard cut through the hull with beams, ripping the top open all the way to the cockpit. That made the ship tumble and it crashed into the station, shattering into thousands of pieces which drifted toward the boneyard nearby.

Dennis's blood continued to boil. He wanted more and there were pilots out there fighting with Anna and the others. He didn't care if Mustang went with him, half hoped they wouldn't bother. Altering course, he headed toward the action, kicking his afterburners to full. His people formed up with him.

Apparently, they wanted another piece of the Tol'An as well. He couldn't blame them. When they finished at the station, they'd go to their base and wipe them clean from the universe. Everyone would be better off after their execution, after their total extermination. Dennis fully intended to be there, to witness their end.

Terrorists deserved extinction. Humanity would be the ones to give it to them.

***

Dulain's com unit lit up while he sat in the operations center. Christina reached out on his private channel. He stepped out of the room, ensuring he was totally alone before he accepted the transmission.

"I didn't expect to hear from you like this," he said. "Is everything in order? I'm in private . . . relative private."

"I've got a lot of data to go through," Christina said. "We're going to need to be sequestered with it. I'm hoping for a room with a shower attached so we can get cleaned up and go to work. Maybe one of the

long-term apartments? Stock it up with food. We might be a while."
"I'd hoped for more immediate intel," Dulain said. "What do you have that I can feed the admiral? Or some of his cronies?"
"Not much," Christina said. "The facility was fully occupied by some force. They weren't wearing insignias . . . Maybe mercenaries or part of this terrorist cell. We downloaded info from their terminal though so I'll know who they are soon enough."
"Were you injured?"
"It went loud," Christina replied, "but we're not hurt. Not really. We're going to be back at the base in less than thirty minutes. Can you get the space ready? We'll need a trustworthy escort too. God knows if we have a traitor inside Gamma Alpha, they might make a go at us. In fact, we might even want to clear the tarmac."
Dulain hummed. "You're starting to sound as paranoid as me."
"I learned from you," Christina said, "so I don't think that's a big surprise."
"Cute." Dulain chuckled. "Anyway, I'll have everything ready for your arrival, including some guards. We'll talk after you've settled in. Thank you, for your efforts. Sounds like you had a bit of a rough time."
"To put it lightly," Christina replied. "Christina out."
The line went dead and Dulain hurried back into operation control. He put a few of his agents on the task of finding a good room for the investigation and put things in motion. A few hours later, they would likely have the information they needed to retaliate against the traitors and their people.
When that mission proved to be a success, the AIA would have once again shown their value. Once the military took down the terrorists once and for all, it would likely be the leg up Dulain needed for another promotion. He'd be in the position he wanted, moving into the political arena finally.
But first, the preservation of Earth. Then . . . leadership into the stars. One step at a time.

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Chapter 10

Heat blasted an enemy charging him from the left, grabbing the body as it nearly collapsed on him. Had it not been for his armor, he would've been taken to the ground but the enhanced strength afforded by the hydraulics allowed him to toss it to the side. The corpse slammed into the wall with enough force to crack the spine.

Another two jumped on Gillet's back. They were ripped free by Vine and slammed into the ground, their hips and legs liquefied by the contact. Eight more combatants threw themselves into the meat grinder against the marines, trying to hamper their progress. Each enemy body ended up broken on the floor.

They progressed to the next module, drawing ever nearer to their prize. Heat knew they were two away. He instinctually dropped to the ground, half a second before gunfire—their type of weapons—blasted the wall where his head had been a moment before. He didn't rise immediately, remaining behind the cover of a computer console.

"Friendly fire!" Vine shouted. "Stop!"

The guns went off again.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kelly yelled. "Guys, it's us! Stop shooting!"

Heat looked back just as Brock took a full burst to the chest and head. His armor prevented most of the damage but a hose broke free, spraying hydraulic fluid from a seam in his armor. Someone would've had to know precisely where to shoot to make that happen. So if team two had fallen under the sway of the station, they maintained some peace of mind.

The marines standing opposite them on the other side of the room barely resembled team two anymore. They were covered in blood, bits of flesh and clothing clung to their armor. One had a head stuck to the top of his helmet, another carried an arm in his left hand, wielding his rifle in the right.

They'd been busy with the scavengers, likely tearing them apart with their bare hands. Heat assumed this because they hadn't heard gunfire

but those men had clearly been through quite a lot. Whatever savagery overtook them manifested in a horrifying way and if they could be saved, any memory of their actions would taint them for life.
“Stand down!” Heat barked. “That’s an order!”
“Go to hell!” The screaming voice barely sounded human, let alone as any distinct person. It gave Heat the chills, making him ill to think about one of his people being totally consumed the same way as the others. Yet, this person sounded normal compared to the freaks they’d been fighting.
Perhaps it was a matter of how long they spent on the station as opposed. More exposure might’ve meant less control.
“I don’t think I heard you, soldier!” Heat shouted, once again trying to break through the conditioning. “You will stand down this instant and help us take the objective! Each of you scum sucking piles of shit joined the marines! You are not allowed to succumb to alien intellects! You are the best Earth has to offer! Prove it!”
“We’re . . . firing . . . at our own people!” He recognized that voice. Private Conti. He stood out as a poster child marine. Six-three, black hair, blue eyes . . . Looked like a real warrior. If he was coming around, that meant the truly committed men might be salvageable.
“Fight it guys! We can’t do this!”
The next sound of pure, inarticulate rage came from the man who told them to go to hell moments before. He fired wildly. Conti screamed. More gunfire went off. A massive battle broke out not twelve feet away. Heat directed his people to follow him, to stay low and crawl to the next door.
Heat tapped the panel, moving into the next hallway. Rockets started flying and he cursed. “Move it! All of you get your asses out of there!”
The marines rushed toward the next module just as the hull was torn open at multiple points around the room. The ceiling, floor, and one wall had holes large enough for three men to fit shoulder to shoulder. Air poured through the hole, dragging anything loose into space. Two armored men burst outside, gone in an instant.
Heat stood at the end of the hallway, clinging to the wall. Vine and Kelly crawled inside, turning to the others. They shouted over the

coms, telling them to hurry. Brock's damaged armor hampered him and he struggled to crawl toward them. Erskin headed out there to help but not even five feet from their comrade, Brock lost his grip and slipped out of the station.

"No!" Erskin shouted, grabbing the wall and dragging himself back toward the others.

"Come on!" Vine shouted. "Move your ass, Erskin!"

Other marines went flying out, bodies of the fallen members of team two. They were scorched and burned from the rocket attacks, pieces of armor broken free. Heat's shoulders slumped when he saw Conti's body follow them but not all of them were accounted for. Some must've escaped, must've slipped into a different module.

Great, Heat thought, *more targets as well armed as we are*.

Erskin drew close enough for Vine and Kelly to drag him into the hall. They shut the door, ending vacuum. Five of them were left and it was impossible to know how many additional soldiers they faced before they'd reach their objective. Heat knew how close they were but it almost didn't matter.

What would happen when they got there? Even if they got the Orb, how would they get it away? Trying to transport the thing through the station with God knows how many enemies running around sounded like a nightmare. An impossibility if he was to be honest. And that was *if* the other shuttle remained attached to the station.

Without communications, they were isolated, unable to call for help. Moving forward felt irresponsible. *We're throwing our lives away*.

Heat shook his head violently and it suddenly cleared. "Holy shit . . ." he muttered.

"What's that, boss?" Vine asked. "Are we moving out?"

"We should press on," Gillet said. "There's no point in sitting around here right now."

"I just . . . had a moment." Heat looked them over. "Were you . . . worried a moment ago?"

Erskin laughed. "I've been worried since we boarded this bitch." His comment made the others chuckle, though it seemed forced.

"I'm serious," Heat replied. "Did you feel a sense of despair?

Something like that?"
"I thought it was because of poor Brock," Gillet said. "Because of team two."
"Partially," Heat said. "But I think it's me."
"You?" Vine shrugged. "What's that even mean?"
"It's hard to explain." Heat sighed. "Let's just be glad I made that trip into the Orb or we'd all be dead right now." He motioned. "Follow me, guys. The Orb is just on the other side of this module. God knows we're about to encounter more soldiers but hopefully, we won't find anymore with weapons like ours. Not for a while at least."
"Someone survived on team two," Gillet said. "Is that what you're saying?"
"Yeah." Heat nodded. "And there are only a few places I think they'd go. The most logical is they've been called back to the center of the station to defend the Orb . . . to keep us from taking it. I think whatever we're facing, the real enemy, knows that it can't *truly* affect us. We've got a small advantage in that way . . . but it makes us prime targets."
"What're we waiting for?" Vine asked, advancing ahead of everyone. "I'm taking point. I want to see whatever this sack of shit is in person . . . and then I'm going to put my boot so far up its ass, it'll be coughing up toe jam."
Colorful, Heat thought. *I wonder if I should tell them that it's not a human being at all . . . that it's some kind of amorphous* thing *without a physical form.* He shook his head. *I don't think they're interested in that kind of bad news just now. We've got enough problems without putting monsters in the equation.*

***

Desmond glared at his personal screen, watching as the final shuttle went down. Robbing the Tol'An of the ability to board the station allowed the Gnosis to initiate their plan. As they closed in on the debris field, he quickly plotted the distance between them and the destroyer.

In less than three minutes, the boneyard would be directly between them and the destroyer.
“Salina, start broadcasting that signal,” Desmond said. “It’ll take them a moment to realize what they’re seeing. Zach, start the energy build up in the hyperdrive. The combination of those two things should be like a beacon in the night. If they don’t catch on, they shouldn’t be out here at all.”
“Yes, sir.” Salina tapped something hard. “We’re now broadcasting a signal equivalent to the Orb and a touch stronger, just enough to get past any sort of interference the field might present.”
“Hyperdrive is online,” Zach said. “Ten minutes until our fake jump is ready to go.”
“Sounds good.” Desmond turned to Vincent. “Are our fighters engaging theirs?”
“Yes, sir,” Vincent replied. “And Mustang’s on the way to help. They have odds so it shouldn’t be too much of a fight, to be honest.” He paused. “As I think of it, the Tol’An must’ve thought the same way we did. There wouldn’t be any opposition out here.”
“Looks like we all made some mistakes,” Desmond said. “Theirs will be fatal.” He checked their course again. They were nearly in position. “Has the destroyer responded to the signals?”
“Not yet,” Salina said. “They are holding position.”
Vincent hummed. “Maybe they know we’ve never left fighters behind? They might think this is a ruse.”
“I guess we’ll have to see,” Desmond replied. “My experience suggests that the type of opponent we’re up against believes everyone plays from the same book. They’d abandon people in a heartbeat if they secured their objective. Why wouldn’t we?” He shrugged. “If they call our bluff, we’ll deal with it then but at least they can’t field troops.”
“They are firing up their engines,” Salina said. “They’re hailing us.”
“Really?” Desmond smirked. “Give me audio over here.” He waited for the connection to pop in his ear. “This is Captain Bradford.”
“Surrender your vessel immediately,” came the reply. “This is Montag Zhin of the Tol’An and we demand you heave to for boarding.”
“I’m afraid we can’t do that,” Desmond said. “After all, we’ve got what

we came for. You can have the rest."
"Do not make us fire upon you!" Montag shouted. "Heave to! Now! We are on approach and will be there quickly!"
"By all means then," Desmond said. "Come on over. We'll just power down and wait for your approach." He killed the connection. "Stop the hyperdrive build up. Keep the Orb power going." He turned to Vincent. "This is going to work. I can't believe this anomaly is going to make this possible."
"We're lucky we didn't run into it when we arrived," Vincent said.
"Hell, so are they. Now . . . Well . . . We'll see whether a Tol'An destroyer can survive a collision in space."
"My money's on no." Desmond gestured to Zach. "Get our weapons ready, low power to avoid detection. If they make it through, I want to hit them with everything. Finish the thing off before it gets too close. If their reactor goes up, that could cause some damage so we want to keep them away."
"When they go up, the debris will be cast all over this system," Vincent pointed out. "Some of it toward us."
"Good point." Desmond nodded. "Get ready for some evasive flying, Zach . . . and if we don't have to shoot the Tol'an, we'll take care of the largest obstacles." He turned back to his screen, watching as the destroyer closed on them. They were less than five thousand kilometers from entering the boneyard and did not appear to be slowing at all.
They're going to hit that thing at full speed, Desmond shook his head. *That will leave a mark. Hopefully, we've bought our men on the station a little more time. If they're still alive. After we contend with our visitors, I have to find a way to get them out of there. One problem at a time though. One problem at a time.*

***

Anna took a full barrage of energy blasts to the bottom of her ship, flipping as an alarm went off. The attack dropped her shields to forty percent, which showed a marked improvement over the previous

designs. During their first engagement, she would've had to eject. Now, she escaped destruction and maintained her defenses for a little longer.

It was still luck though, Anna thought. *That could've been a lot worse*. She marked her attacker, a particularly wily opponent who swung around, trying to get another firing solution. They started the dance, a real dogfight that involved quick passes and short bursts. Now that she was aware of him, he struggled to get her back in his sights.

"We're having a rough time over here!" Lieutenant Preston Everest shouted out. He was acting second in command of Charger, awaiting the word on his full transfer to the position. "Carson's gone crazy!"

When Anna received the message at first, she thought her people were struggling with the enemy. Hearing it involved Carson enraged her far beyond even being shot by the enemy. *What the hell is wrong with that guy?* Her target made a mistake, climbing in front of her for a brief moment.

Two beam shots took down his shields, the third knocked out one of his two thrusters. Thus hampered, his speed suffered and she switched to guns, depressing the trigger until the computer warned her that the weapons were overheating. Letting up, the ship in front of her drifted, half the tail shorn off by the attack.

"So what the hell is going on?" Anna spun around and raced back toward her comrades. The Tol'An vessels appeared to be on retreat but Carson's ship was attacking one of their own. Flight Lieutenant Dylan Ball, Raptor Two and technically, his superior officer. Com net was lit up with people yelling at him to stand down.

Mustang approached, Dennis reached out to Anna for an update. She barely knew what to say. "Carson's gone mad," she finally replied. "He's attacking Dylan and won't respond to hails. We're . . . We have to disable him. Knock his shields out and put him down so we can get him back to the ship."

While she knew that was the right thing to say, deep inside she wanted to finish him off, blow his vessel out of the sky. His insubordination earlier should've been a death sentence. He deserved it, did everything in his power to put himself in a criminal position.

Hatred welled up in her stomach and she armed her missiles.
"Whoa, Anna!" Dennis shouted at her. "Those are *not* going to disable his ship! Stand down on those."
"Shut up," Anna grumbled. "There's no reason to let this asshole live. I was wrong. We put him down and show the others that insubordination won't be tolerated in wartime."
"That's not the way to do this," Dennis insisted. "Stand down, Squadron Leader. That's a direct order. I have operational control over this mission and I'm *ordering* you to back off immediately!"
Anna struggled with his command, part of her pushing to obey but the rage . . . The passion demanded action. *I can't do this*. She had a firing solution. It might've hit Dylan but that felt like an acceptable loss to take care of a traitor. And yet, Dennis's order hung in her mind, clinging to her senses and forcing her to fight the urge to kill.
I . . . won't . . . Anna veered off, cursing violently as she did so. The other members of Raptor blasted Carson with beam weapons, whittling away his shields. She turned to watch as they did their best to knock him down carefully. He finally joined them on the communications channel.
"You'll all burn in hell for this!" Carson shouted. "Traitors! Each of you! I can't believe you'd do this to me! To the cause! Humanity is doomed!"
"Stand down," Dimitri barked back. "Disable your weapons and surrender your vessel, Carson! We're taking you back to the ship to get you some help."
"I won't succumb to your criminal behavior!" Carson screamed inarticulately for a moment, as if in agony. "No! You cannot take me! I refuse to be! This is the end! Die! All of you die!"
A power surge erupted from his vessel. Raptor ships burst away from him, hitting their afterburners as his core went critical. Anna's eyes widened. *He's initiated self-destruct! What the hell happened to that man?* But inside, she knew that he'd been possessed by the same hatred and anger she had felt moments before.
Only he hadn't been able to fight it off. The fighters gave him distance as his ship exploded. Carson did not eject. A bright light consumed his

vessel and when it faded, he was gone.
“Jesus Christ . . .” Dennis whispered over the com but his voice still sounded loud after the moment of silence. “Team, I want everyone back onboard the Gnosis immediately. That’s an order.”
“What about the other fighters?” Alicia asked. “They’re getting away.”
“Going back to their own ship,” Dennis replied. “I don’t want a repeat of what we just saw with Carson. Return to base *now*. I won’t repeat that order.”
Anna heard a little of the rage in his voice, a bit of the anger that nearly drove her to fire a missile at her ally. She complied, sending the same message to her unit, reinforcing the need. They formed up and flew back, a solemn bunch after what they’d just witnessed. *If this happened to us, what has happened to the marines?*
The thought made Anna sick to her stomach and she felt for them. They didn’t have the benefit of simply leaving the area, of returning to base to get some help and avoid further contact. She couldn’t imagine what they might be seeing, how bad it might’ve gotten. She went against her nature when she armed that missile.
How far off could the marines have been? They were a rough and tumble crew, trained to be violent. If those tendencies were enhanced, pushed over the edge, then they might very well be so far gone, they’d never come back. Carson had been an easy going individual prior to that mission.
Hopefully, they had the willpower to fight back. Without it, the space station might be a total wash . . . and the Gnosis may have lost every single ground troop they sent over there. The tragic waste made Anna angry again and she had to fight hard to push it back down. *Now’s not the time for extreme emotions. We need to stay calm if we’re going to get out of this*.
A task far easier said than done.

***

General Trall sat on the bridge of the flagship, staring at his tablet. They were still in hyperspace but not for much longer. Still, just

before they left the Tol'An home base, he received an update as to the whereabouts of Gizan and what might have happened to him on his last mission.

Spies indicated neither the humans nor the Pahxin had his body. Tol'An operatives searched the entire base and all the mining shafts to no avail. While none of that worked out, one of his more clever technical officers located some solid information in a security feed leaving the planet.

Gizan survived and slipped off planet with a group of workers who survived the carnage.

You clever bastard, Trall thought. *What exactly do you think you'll get up to out there? How far can you possibly run?*

Gizan may have failed in two missions but that did not make him an easy mark to track. His skills as an assassin were legendary, even before the Tol'An came into power. Did the man merely want to escape? Or did he have another nefarious plan in mind? He must've known Ezria would execute him for failing again.

This meant Gizan might want to kill Ezria before such a thing could happen.

And he knows the location of our home world. Trall scowled, fighting back a sense of frustration.

Ezria created the problem with his heavy-handed punishment system. Trall understood the need to discipline failure but by putting a man like Gizan on guard, they endangered the entire operation. If he turned to the Pahxin, if he gave them the coordinates to their primary base, the Tol'An could not withstand the force launched at them.

All the Master had to do was give him an option, Trall thought. *If Gizan didn't know for a fact his life was forfeit, he may have come back on his own.*

Worse, anyone Trall sent after the man may very well die trying to apprehend him. He was not only a loose end but a dangerous one capable of more damage than anyone else in the Tol'An camp. *How exactly am I going to handle you, Gizan? Perhaps I can appeal to your obligation, the oath you took to the Tol'An*.

If, through some miracle, he could talk to the man. But finding the

assassin and communicating with him would be one of the biggest challenges of Trall's career. Partially because he was not an investigator but also due to the nature of Gizan's skills. If he didn't want to be found, he likely wouldn't be.

There were too many options, too many places he could go. That slip up with the security camera may not have even been an accident. There was a slim possibility that he did it to challenge the Tol'An. *Come find me*, it suggested. *I'll make you pay for wasting your time while I work my way up the ranks*.

"I hope you're not against us now," Trall muttered, leaning back in his chair.

The battleship would be emerging from hyperspace soon, along with his fleet of four destroyers. He couldn't risk leaving the base undefended but he would've liked to bring more. Depending on what he found, he may well have to turn around and immediately leave. Either way, he prepared himself for the immediate threat.

All while the long-term concern of Gizan hovered in the back of his mind.

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Chapter 11

Vincent wore a grim expression while reading the report of Carson's behavior in the field, up to his suicide. He related the information to Desmond, keeping his voice low. The anomaly out there caused a man to take his own life. Holland and Salina needed to get that vibration under control . . . for the sake of the marines.

"Salina," Vincent turned to her. "Can you initiate the cancellation of the vibration yet?"

"Wait," Desmond said. "We can't do it yet."

"Sir?" Vincent's brows lifted. "The Marines . . . "

"We're canceling it out in a large area," Desmond explained. "That means we'd be showing the Tol'An the field before they crashed into it. Once they're so far committed they can't pull back, then you can initiate it. Another few moments won't make any difference as far as what's going on at the station."

"And we'll finally be able to board," Gil said, "to see what's happened . . . initiate a rescue mission."

Desmond nodded. "Vincent, get with Fielding and Gabriel about sending in some reinforcements. A couple people should cover it. If it's too crazy, they'll just leave and we'll figure something else out."

"Yes, sir." Vincent tapped the com, hailing Captain Gabriel. He answered right away. "We need to talk about a scouting party. We're about to cancel out whatever's causing people to lose their minds but once we do, we need to check on the people there. Do you have two or three that you can spare in power armor?"

"Fielding and I will go personally," Gabriel said.

"I thought Fielding was still on light duty."

"You try to get him to stick around with all of his men over there," Gabriel replied. "We'll get ready now."

The line went dead and Vincent turned to Desmond. "They're on it."

"Good." Desmond gestured to the screen. "Here they come."

The Tol'An vessel picked up speed, flying straight for them. They would enter the debris field at any moment. Smaller bits of metal and

rock hung in space, tapping their shields, not big enough to warrant notice but then, they struck a particularly large chunk of a starship, something big enough to make their defenses flare up.
Salina announced, “they’ve hailed us, stating we were ordered to stand down.”
“Let them know we didn’t fire,” Desmond said, “though I doubt it’s going to matter in a moment.”
The Tol’An’s momentum carried them further into the boneyard, chunks of debris battering their hull. Their shields lasted through the first several collisions but they dropped abruptly as a particularly massive rock battered them on the starboard side. Fire erupted from hull breaches.
“Excellent,” Desmond said. “That worked far better than I could’ve hoped. Zach, open fire.”
Vincent turned to him, “sir?”
“Yes?”
“I think they’re already done . . . Do we need to . . . well . . .”
“They’re a hostile force,” Desmond replied. “They ordered us to stand down so they could take the Orb. Yes, that’s necessary. Zach?”
“Captain,” Salina jumped in. “Their core is going critical. We should withdraw from the field to avoid damage.”
“As soon as we hasten these bastards on their way to hell,” Desmond said.
“Initiate the device,” Vincent ordered. “Salina, cancel out that vibration. Now.”
Salina returned to her post and tapped the terminal several times. A high-pitched whine filled the bridge. Vincent slapped his hands over his ears until it subsided but even when the sound faded away, his skin itched and crawled. Desmond leaned forward, gripping his head for several long moments.
All eyes remained on him before he finally leaned back and drew a deep breath. “Withdraw from the area,” he muttered. “Hurry, Zach.”
The pilot initiated the maneuver moments before the Tol’An ship exploded. Scanners showed the debris flying in all directions, thrown by the blast. Much of it hammered the space station, riddling it with

thousands of chunks of various sizes. If the facility hadn't been so large, the bombardment might've been enough to destroy it utterly. Automatic defenses blasted some of the larger pieces but it was clear they'd need some help. Luckily, their pilots remained outside and Vincent directed them to sweep the area, cleaning up the larger chunks that threatened the ship. Even so, they needed to remain vigilant until they could leave the area entirely.

"Captain . . ." Vincent turned to him. "You were . . ."

"Yeah, pissed," Desmond said. "Totally enraged by the Tol'An to the point I could barely think. It was incredible."

"The effects of the vibrations," Salina said. "They are far more intense on the station. We've toned them down but not entirely. Those under the effects *might* be calmed somewhat . . . perhaps even enough to be jarred back into a state of control. Depending on what they've done and what they remember though . . ."

"It could be bad," Cassie added. "Imagine realizing you'd committed murder . . . or worse."

"Can we get through with the coms yet?" Desmond asked. "To the station?"

"Trying again," Salina said. "Give me a few minutes."

Vincent shivered from the odd sensation clawing at his skin. The irritation felt far better than the low level of emotional turmoil he'd been dealing with earlier but only just. It might even be enough to drive some of the people on the station crazier, depending on how agitated they already were.

"No signal yet," Salina said. "But the interference has cleared somewhat. I'll set up an automated message to ping them constantly. When they respond, we'll know."

"Good." Desmond scratched the back of his neck. "I want to get out of here as quickly as possible. For the sake of everyone."

***

Heat followed Vine closely through the next module, half surprised to find the section empty. They approached the door to the central

chamber, the dead center of the entire facility. As they reached for the panel to open up, a high-pitched whine filled the station, a bizarre noise that his helmet immediately dampened.
“What the hell was that?” Gillet asked. “Did you guys hear it?”
“Of course we did,” Kelly grumbled. “God! My skin! It’s like shit’s crawling all over me!”
“Calm down,” Heat said. He felt it too but he forced himself to relax. “Just breathe. We’re about to go into the most dangerous part of this station. It could be insane, guys so you have to remain focused. Everyone in this room is going home, right? Every one of you should have that firmly planted in your minds.”
They each huffed out a *hoo-yah*. “Good,” Heat continued. “I’m going to open the door. Get to the sides in case someone starts shooting right away.”
The marines separated, preparing themselves for the coming action. Heat hit the button, sending the door up into the ceiling. He paused, giving Vine and the others a chance to fire but none of them moved. Gillet lowered his weapon. The others exchanged glances, each seemed frozen to the spot.
Heat peeked into the room, taking two steps back. The Orb sat in the center of the room, resting on a pedestal surrounded by something jagged. A closer look revealed bones, dismembered body parts, skulls and other less obvious piles of goo. Men stood around it all in a circle, their arms raised in the air.
Over the Orb, a black cloud shifted and churned with tiny blue bolts of electricity dancing about it. Heat *felt* a presence within that amorphous thing, a consciousness of incredible intensity. It reached out to him, whispering in his ear but that wasn’t the whole story behind it.
No, the sound he heard, the words tickling his mind were not from the cloud but his own mind. It tried to trick him by bolstering negative thoughts. He shook his head emphatically, battling it off but it required a serious struggle. The others behind him were dumbfounded by their discovery, protected but paralyzed.
Something made his skin crawl, a sudden tickle covering his whole

body. He desperately needed to scratch, wishing he wasn't wearing his armor. While the physical discomfort continued, the mental assault from the strange anomaly eased up. His men advanced.

"Do you feel that?" Gillet asked. "Holy shit, it's like someone's poured ants in my armor."

"At least you can think," Heat said. "Mostly. Look." He directed their attention to the men inside the room. They lowered their arms, scratching at them wildly. Each of them looked confused until they noticed the altar they were surrounding, the horror before them.

"They're about to have a bad moment."

"What?" Gillet lifted his weapon. "Shit, they're about to freak out, aren't they?"

Heat nodded, taking aim as well. "Something's hampering the anomaly but it's only doing a partial job. We might not have much time before they become violent."

"Let's get the Orb and get out then," Vine said.

"Won't be that easy . . ."

A door on the other side of the altar room opened. An armored marine stepped inside, instantly opening fire on the idolaters. Bodies hit the ground, none of them reacted swiftly enough to survive the onslaught.

Gillet took aim. "Shit, Heat! What do we do with this? What do we do?"

The marine cut down the last of them, turning his attention to the Orb. He began to lift his weapon. Heat shouted, "light him up!"

The whole team blasted away and Heat prayed they had the type of aim they should've given their status. Their target took most of the hits, dancing backward toward the door. His armor gave him an edge over the others and he dashed through the door. There was no way he walked away unscathed. Adrenaline must've carried him out.

"Secure this room!" Heat shouted. "Gillet, you're with me. The rest of you are in here. Anything comes in besides us, you kill it. Let's go!"

Heat dashed through the room with Gillet close behind. They burst into the next hallway, each dodging to the side as their opponent fired at the door. They shot back, driving the man further away from the Orb, toward the sound of approaching footsteps. Dozens of them,

perhaps more of the pirates or Tol'An, it was impossible to tell. Before they reached the next room, they heard their former companion's weapon fire again. He began to scream but it was drowned out beneath the shouts of others. Heat opened the door, swallowing hard as he witnessed a savage display of horrific murder. A crowd descended upon the armored marine, ripping his armor off with wild adrenalized rage. In moments, they were at his bare skin, tearing at him until his cries ended. Heat barely had time to think about pointing his gun at them before they'd killed him. One looked in their direction, wild eyes above a blood caked mouth.

"They're *eating* people . . ." Heat muttered. He pulled out a grenade. "Gillet."

His companion did the same. They cooked them both then tossed in the explosives. The door closed a moment before they exploded. Organic splatters filled the air followed by the pained cries of the dying.

"Do you think it's over?" Gillet asked. "Did we win?"

"I kind of doubt it," Heat said. "But if there are more, we have to the Orb away from the anomaly. I think . . . and I don't know how I know this but . . . it's like life support for that thing. It feeds on people but survives because of the power of the Orb."

"And you know this?"

Heat nodded. "Maybe the Orb is the reason it exists . . . It doesn't matter. Come on. I have an idea of what to do."

"What?"

"You won't like it," Heat replied. "We have to get a hold of the Gnosis. I intend to pop a hole in the hull, get the Orb out and let them pull a search and rescue on it . . . and us."

"Wait . . . Us?" Gillet followed him as they started walking. "Are you saying we're going to jettison ourselves into space?"

"Safer than sticking around here to see if there are more freaks ready to kill us." Heat patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, every marine wants to take a walk in space, don't they? We've got the jump jets for some minor maneuverability. It'll be fine. What could go wrong?"

"Pretty much everything," Gillet said. "Like . . . if we screw up, the

Orb will be trashed on its way out the damn hole."
"Believe me, if there's anything we know how to do well, it's blowing holes in stuff." Heat cleared his throat. "I hope."
"Not filling me with confidence."
"We're coming through!" Heat shouted. "Don't shoot!"
They entered the room and found their companions standing still, staring up at the anomaly. "Crap . . ." Heat muttered. "I hope I can bring them back."
"Yeah, how do you do that again?"
Heat shrugged. "My presence was what kept you guys okay before."
"It's not helping now."
"Give it a minute." Heat tapped his helmet, bringing up the com. "Gnosis, this is Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow. Do you copy?"

***

Fielding suited up, wincing as the armor clamped down over his bad shoulder. It had healed fairly well but wasn't all the way there yet. Doctors said another five days without strain. How many would it take after his excursion to the station? That was anyone's guess. Providing they stuck to the plan of checking the situation and leaving, they should be fine.
He met Captain Gabriel in the hangar. The older man looked terribly severe wearing the suit, his cropped gray hair tight against his tan scalp. Fielding never understood how Gabriel maintained the skin tone when they spent so much time at space and he didn't want to ask. If the man used a spray, it would be disappointing.
"You up for this?" Gabriel asked. "No real shame if you say no."
"Sir," Fielding tilted his head, "are you seriously asking me that?"
"Had to. Conscience wouldn't let me go without giving you a chance to back out." Gabriel shrugged. "Glad to know I was right about you . . . Even if it is a bad idea."
They boarded the shuttle, Gabriel shut the door behind them. The pilot worked on getting clearance for them while they strapped in. Once the shuttle cleared the bay doors, Fielding peered out at the

station, frowning at all the visible damage. It had been through hell and most of it seemed to happen after the Gnosis arrived.
“Sir,” Fielding said, “what do you make the chances of them still being alive on that thing?”
“Slim,” Gabriel replied. “If I’m to be honest. That place is pretty hosed. It would be a miracle if anyone’s alive. I think we’re heading over there to confirm a lot of deaths . . . and possibly recover the cargo we came for.”
“No room for hope then, huh?”
Gabriel shrugged. “I’ve run a lot of ops on both sides of the com. There’s always room I suppose . . . and Heathrow’s pulled off some impossible nonsense. I can’t put anything past that guy.”
Fielding smirked at that. They had seen him do some crazy things. He deserved a promotion and when things were side and done, he’d very likely get one. If he survived. It really was difficult to think of him as lying dead on the desolate station, after all he’d been through and done.
But he felt the same way about Sergeant Gorman. That man’s record spoke for itself and he sacrificed himself for the greater good of his team. The number of good men humanity lost in their skirmish war took quite the toll. Many who thought they were simply going into space to explore the galaxy were gone.
Can’t be these guys, Fielding thought. *They’re too stubborn to die*.
“We’re five hundred kilometers to target,” the pilot said. “Picking up life signs on board. Interference is making it hard to tell just how many.”
Of course it is. Fielding rolled his eyes. This time, the problem probably stemmed from the destruction of the Tol’An ship nearby. That explosion left a tremendous amount of radiation. Some of the fighters had to clear the area around the Gnosis to make it safe to board. “Docking will be a challenge, at least on this side of things.”
Gabriel peered out the window. “The highest concentration of life forms seems to be near the center. We should probably swing around and get as close to that as possible.”
They stared around the structure, pulling further away from the

Gnosis. Fielding kept a sharp eye on his own scanner, checking for enemy fighters. They were all supposed to be destroyed, but with all the scanner problems, there was no way to know for sure. Anything could be hiding out there.

Something pinged his com, a signal coming from nearby. Fielding tried to acknowledge it but it was already gone. *Damn it!* He tapped at his wrist computer, revealing it from the armor to try and trace the source but it had happened too fast. He half thought he might've imagined it.

"Did you get a signal just now?" Fielding asked. Gabriel began to answer when it happened again. "Sorry, sir. Hold on." It became stronger as they drew closer to the center of the station. "I've almost got this. It could be a message from the team . . . or at least someone . . . on board the facility."

"Gnosis!" Heat's voice came through garbled and messy, but it was clearly him. "This is . . . Can you . . . me?"

"Heat?" Fielding shouted. "Can you hear me? Hello?"

"Lieutenant!" Heat's voice came through much better, still garbled but more distinct. "You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice. Thank God!"

"Are you okay? Where are you? We're in a shuttle on our way to the facility. We can pick you up."

"That's good news," Heat said, "but not for the reason you think. Don't bother to dock here. We're about to leave."

Fielding frowned. "Leave? How? Where? What're you talking about?"

"Um . . . well . . . we have the Orb but getting it out of here is going to be a challenge so we thought we might jettison it . . . and ourselves."

Heat didn't stop there. "If you're already in a shuttle, we can hook up that way. It makes this plan slightly less crazy . . . and gives it the potential to work."

"I see." Fielding sighed. "One second."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but we don't have much time."

Fielding shook his head, quickly explaining the plan to Gabriel. The captain chuckled in response. "Of course he came up with something like that." He turned. "We're going to need to head down. I'll inform

the Gnosis we just turned this into a rescue operation. Fielding, do your best to coordinate with those marines and let's bring them home."

"Okay, Heat," Fielding said, "we're moving into position to support you. Get it done . . . as safely as this crazy plan will let you."

"Will do, sir." Heat's connection fizzled out as another rush of interference cut them off.

"Gabriel finished giving the news to the ship, laughing again. "Those boys sure know how to make an exit, huh?"

"You sure we should've enabled them to pull this off?"

That seemed to push Gabriel over the edge and he really cackled.

"You think we could've stopped em? Sure, threaten with a report or some other nonsense but you and I have no idea what they saw or had to do over there. We don't even know how many are left. If they have a way to escape, they're going to take it . . . even if it's slim."

"A million things could go wrong," Fielding said. "Suit malfunction, getting torn through a hole too small . . . Those are the two off the top of my head."

"Yeah, true. So just imagine why they're willing to take those risks." Gabriel put his hands behind his head. "That's the kind of improvisational thinking I like to see in marines. I just hope more than two or three of them survived."

A morbid thought, but Fielding understood where it came from. Before they even boarded the shuttle, he resigned himself to writing letters to the families of every man on the station. It would be particularly difficult for the first timers, the guys who had only *just* left the planet.

But it wasn't a complete loss. That was the point to focus on. All the rest, the mourning and anger, could wait.

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Chapter 12

Cassie ran a scan over the station again. With the counter in place for the strange vibration, she hoped any masking would be gone. Sure enough, she located the device in the center of the station. A limited number of life forms seemed to be around it but in the outer sections, those that weren't damaged, there were still quite a few people.

She sent a ping to that section of the facility, hoping to get a communication through but there was too much interference from the destroyed Tol'An vessel. Their shuttle seemed to be going around the station then abruptly headed for what would be considered the bottom. Plotting their course showed they were heading for the center module.

"Captain, I've got the Orb," Cassie said. "I've marked it on the schematics of the facility."

"Heat reported in," Desmond replied. "Got through to Lieutenant Fielding. They're going in for a pickup but they haven't explained the plan exactly. It doesn't involve docking though."

"I'll get fighter escort," Vincent added.

Salina sent a message to Cassie, pointing out another reading from the area. An unstable mass . . . Big one. Explosives, probably enough to detach the entire module from the whole. It would likely just pop a hole in the thing. When the Tol'An ship exploded, sending shards into the walls of the facility, it didn't prove to be particularly resilient.

"Who would do that?" Cassie asked. "Surely, this isn't *our* people? They must be trying to destroy the Orb."

Salina shook her head. "You've spent enough time with those marines to know better than that. Come on now. Do you really think they didn't come up with a way to detonate their remaining rockets to get out of there?"

"But the explosion . . ." Cassie shrugged. "Am I wrong that this is endangering the device?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it's endangered." Salina frowned, peering at her screen for a long moment. "They might have a plan. Those men tend to be

experts at explosives . . . small arms. I'm sure if bombs are coming out, or whatever they specifically rigged up, then they aren't planning on harming the reason they went there."

Cassie didn't feel quite as sure. She'd seen the marines act recklessly before. Yes, it worked out then but this was something else entirely. The energy stored in the Orb held enough destructive power to turn the station into dust. So far, no one managed to push the limits of their structural integrity.

Looks like now is the time.

"I wish we could get through to them." Cassie tried again with no success. "Damn it!"

"Captain," Salina said. "There's a distinct possibility they plan to blow up that part of the station to *create* an exit. If that's true, there's potential for the Orb to be damaged."

"Get Fielding on the line," Desmond said. "Find out what's going on and see if this is something we need to stop."

"I'm on it."

Cassie hoped they knew what they were doing. One false move could kill every living thing in the immediate vicinity. The Gnosis couldn't move quickly enough to avoid the blast if it went off in the next few minutes, never mind the pilots still out mopping up the drifting bits of boneyard making travel hazardous.

One of the uses the Tol'An had for more than one Orb involved weaponizing the energy. They could drop one in a major city, detonate it and cause catastrophic damage, the likes of which even the Pahxin may have not seen before. Depending on where they spent their device, they held the potential to bring a government to their knees.

But the marines knew the stakes. They heard the briefings and Heat, in particular, understood the capabilities of the ancient technology. If anyone should've respected them, it would be him.

I'm really trying to trust you, Heat, Cassie thought, *but you're not making it easy when you start pulling this kind of thing.*

***

Heat helped place the rockets while Gillet handled their personal, one shot shields. They hadn't used them throughout the engagement but he was convinced he could use them to shield the Orb from the blast. Each of them would undoubtedly be burned out but it would be enough to keep the device whole.

I hope that works or this whole sector goes boom. Heat stepped back as they finished placing twelve of the rockets. "That should be all of them. They're set for remote detonation. Let's get into the hallway, shut the door and blow them from there." He turned to Gillet. "How's it going with those shields?"

"They're almost ready," Gillet said. "I had to put them in key locations over the device to keep it safe." He looked up at the strange cloud. "Doubt it's going to affect that thing though."

"Once the Orb's gone, that thing dies," Heat replied. "Don't look at it." He started to turn away and paused. The computer terminal near the Orb was *live*. Lights flashed over it. *This culture must've been studying the Orb. What is this cloud though? It must've been what finished them off*.

Gillet patted his arm. "Let's go, man. We need to make this happen. Fielding isn't going to wait forever."

"Yeah, I get it." Heat shook his head. "Come on, men! Everyone in the hallway!"

Screams sounded from somewhere else in the station, rapidly approaching. "God damn it!" Vine shouted. "We were too slow!"

"Don't worry about it," Heat said. "Once the bombs go off, no one but us can survive in there. Get ready."

They closed the door and Heat counted them back from three. "Fire in the hole!" He hit the detonator and the station shook violently, making them clasp at the walls to maintain their footing. Lights flickered all around them. Hate filled screams turned to terror, people who had regained just enough of their senses to fear death.

The station began to quake violently. Gillet grabbed Heat's arm. "This whole place might be coming apart, man! We need to get the hell out before the station tries to seal the breach!"

"When we open that door," Heat said. "It's going to suck us through

the hole. Be ready. It won't be fun." Just . . . keep your limbs tight to your body and use your thrusters the best you can. Shuttle's out there . . . We gotta get there. You ready for a real ride, marines?"

They gave another *hoo-ah*, though Heat recognized the forced zeal behind it. This might've been the craziest thing he'd ever done so he understood where they were coming from. When they returned to the Gnosis, if they survived, they'd have a real story to tell the folks back home.

Heat braced himself, slinging his weapon. He reached for the panel, tapping the button. The door slid up and he was immediately sucked into the room toward a massive hole in the wall and floor. The Orb was gone along with several of the computer panels. Only the cloud remained, roiling and sparking alone in the ceiling.

He sailed through the room, carried by the suction though there couldn't be much air left. It swept him out into space, tossed well away from the open hole. He tumbled, closing his eyes to avoid becoming ill from the sudden weightlessness. Something bumped him to the right and he opened his eyes, coming in contact with a bloated body.

They surrounded him, dozens at least, all lifeless and still. Some part of his brain suggested he should panic, or be upset about it but he remained steadfast, almost dead inside to the carnage around him. Even as he turned and saw the station modules start to separate, he still felt a profound sense of calm.

I've survived another one, Heat thought. *These odds are getting ridiculous*.

He engaged his thrusters, slowing his spin so he regained control of his motion. It took trial and error before he steadied and stopped rotating. It helped settle his stomach, though the vastness around him threatened to overwhelm his senses.

"Christ, that hurt!" Vine shouted. "Thank *God* my armor held!"

"What happened?" Heat asked. He couldn't see the others. "Everyone sound off."

"I whacked my shoulder on the way out," Vine replied. "We all made it . . . though Kelly bounced off the wall on his way."

"It was bad," Kelly said. "I *swore* felt a seal break. Luckily, I was

wrong."
"So where the hell is this shuttle, Heat?" Gillet asked. "I'd like to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible."
Heat craned his neck, looking all around for their transport. Off to his right, he saw the glow of the Orb, floating some distance away. At least it stuck out enough to be seen from just about any distance. If the Gnosis needed to do the pickup themselves, they'd be able to.
Mission accomplished, I guess.
"Lieutenant, this is Heathrow. Please respond."
Two fighters flew by, seemingly less than three hundred yards off. It made Heat's heart race for a moment and he switched his com over to the wide tactical net. "Hey, stop flying in this sector!" He shouted.
"Repeat, do *not* fly through this sector. There are people floating out here."
A red light appeared on his HUD, indicating his oxygen reserves had less than ten minutes before they'd be exhausted. *Why the hell not?*
"Conserve your oxygen," Heat said. "No unnecessary talking. I'll keep trying to get people on coms." He recorded an automated message and started broadcasting it, working hard to keep his breathing shallow.
I need to buy a little more time. Just another few minutes. Come on, Fielding. I know you're out there.

***

Salina stood suddenly, her scanner lighting up with the explosion on the station. Bodies were cast through the hull, dozens of them spilling through the breach as if they'd been backed up, waiting for the pressure to release. Half a moment later, the Orb burst free as well, drifting into space alongside the corpses.
"Cassie!" Salina gestured to her without looking up. "Check your scan!"
"The Orb!" Cassie turned. "Captain, they released it. It's floating!"
"Gabriel's shuttle is out there," Vincent said. "They'll collect the Orb and whoever made it out of that insanity."
"I'm trying to get them on com," Salina added. "Just give me a

moment."
Desmond asked, "how're we doing with debris, Zach?"
"Clearing up," Zach said. "Fighters are helping. The larger pieces, I took care of. Shields are holding against the smaller pieces that aren't worth wasting shots on. I still think we need to pull well away from this area before we start calculating our trip home. Especially with the station seeming to fall apart."
The view screen showed the module separating as the facility finally gave in to all the damage it had received over the past few hours. Salina found it sad, in a way. That place remained intact for some uncountable number of years before they all converged on it and brought it down.
How did it last so long?
"Coms are clearing up," Salina said. "I should have Gabriel on the line in just a moment. I'll help direct them to where they need to go to get the Orb. Looks like we're on mop up duty at this point."
"We'll stay on alert for now," Desmond said. "We still don't know exactly what caused all this chaos in the first place and I'd like some answers before we call everything good. Bring our people onboard so we can wrap up our investigation and get out of here. And I want to know our casualties so far."
Salina nodded. "I'll work with Webber to make sure communications are a priority. We've got pilots holding a perimeter right now around the Orb and I've got Gabriel on the line. They're almost in position and should be pulling the folks in shortly." She paused. "I just got a message from Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow."
"What's it say?" Desmond asked.
"Damn it." Salina sighed. "They're running low on oxygen. I'll try to get them to hurry, sir. Looks like we've got a little less than seven minutes before they run out. For an operation like this . . . it's going to be cutting it close. At least I've got their beacons up. That's something but . . . oh no . . ."
Vincent prompted her when she didn't continue. "What is it?"
"There are only five beacons . . ."
That comment hit like a ton of bricks, temporarily silencing the

bridge. The marines had gone over with two teams of ten. To be reduced to so few . . .
Cassie broke the silence, “maybe some of them are still on the station.”
“Maybe,” Desmond said. “We won’t know until they’re on board. Move it, people. Those men didn’t go through hell to suffocate out there. Look alive. They deserve every chance we can give them.”

***

Fielding stood near the back door, waiting for the opportunity to throw it open. He and Gabriel secured themselves with tethers and stood ready to deploy out to help the others aboard. The pilot slowed them down as they approached the Orb. Scans showed the marine beacons were nearby, within six hundred yards from their current location in various directions.
The pilot slowed the ship, bringing it to a halt. A moment later, they had the green light to open up. Fielding dropped the ramp and leaned out, immediately regretting his eagerness. The vastness of space yawned before him, casting severe vertigo over him. He struggled, fighting back nausea just as Gabriel dragged him in.
“Careful there,” Gabriel said. “Probably not the place you want to be sick.”
“No sir,” Fielding replied. “Wow . . . I hadn’t anticipated . . .”
“No one does.” Gabriel stepped out on the ramp. “We trained for this early on but you got hurt before we did the drills again. Okay. Let’s take a look here . . .” He peered at his scanner. “We’ve got a marine just over there. Pilot, reverse thrusters, roughly two hundred yards.”
“Yes, sir.” The shuttle began to move, shaking as it did. Fielding held on tight, squinting out the back of the ship as they moved. The first man came into view, slowly tumbling head over heels. Gabriel called for a full stop, grabbed an extra tether and launched himself out the back.
Using thrusters, he maneuvered to the man and secured him, tugging it twice. Fielding hoisted them both back into the shuttle. The process

felt like it took forever but couldn't have even been a full minute. When they were back onboard, Fielding attached oxygen to the marine's suit and Gabriel continued the search.

They inched about the area, collecting the men until only one remained. His beacon flashed not far off, near to the Orb. *Two birds, one stone,* Fielding thought. The ship moved toward them as an alarm went off, the countdown for oxygen. "We're out of time," Gabriel said. "Hurry it up, pilot. He could be suffocating already."

Tiny bits of debris hovered around the final marine along with several dead bodies. Fielding noted it was Heat. *Of course, it's him. Why wouldn't he be the last guy?* They needed to be cautious as they approached, nudging the chunks of metal and rock floating about them rather than hitting it with any real force.

Two chunks tapped the wall hard enough to make the whole shuttle shake. Fielding winced, half convinced they'd see a hole appear but the armored hull repelled it. Gabriel launched himself out again, rocketing forward. He reached the end of the line and needed a little more slack.

The shuttle inched back but overcompensated. They zoomed toward the floating soldiers, coming on them much too quickly. "Forward thrust!" Fielding ordered. "You're about to crash into them!"

A quick burst of engines slowed them sufficiently but it was damn close. Gabriel hovered out there at arm's length and they pulled him and Heat into the shuttle. Attaching oxygen to Heat's suit, Fielding ran a quick, diagnostic on his life signs. He was alive, though he'd passed out at some point.

That probably saved his life, Fielding thought. *Took less oxygen.*

"Now to get the Orb," Gabriel said. "We'll wrap it in cargo webbing and drag it back. There's no room in here for it and us." He turned to Fielding. "I'll go out and do the work. You just make sure this is secure. Might take a few minutes. I'll reach out to the Gnosis and tell them what's going on."

"Alright." Fielding got help from the marines as they took down the cargo netting attached to the walls and secured it with multiple tethers. Providing they moved slowly back to the ship, they shouldn't

have any trouble. He figured they had all the time they needed. After all, their enemies were defeated.

Something shimmered far off to the left, a strange light some distance away. At first, Fielding thought it might be the sun reflecting off of debris, metal pieces catching the light but then the ships began to appear. They looked like warships, though he wasn't sure of the make or design.

"Are those reinforcements?" Fielding asked. "Pahxin ships?"

Gabriel cursed. "No, son. Those are not. We have to hurry."

"Why? Who are they?"

"Tol'An." Gabriel turned to him. "Get me the net. The Gnosis will be impatient now that they've arrived. I'd give us twenty minutes at most to board the ship and get the hell out of here. Which leaves absolutely no room for error, no mistakes. You gotta love the last-minute challenges, huh?"

"Could've done without it, sir." Fielding handed him the net. "We're ready back here. Good luck."

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Chapter 13

“Are you kidding me?” Salina groaned before turning to Desmond. “Sir, you won’t believe this but six Tol’An ships just emerged from hyperspace! A battleship and five destroyers to be specific.” She checked again. “They haven’t moved yet. I’m guessing they’re checking up on their friend.”

Desmond rubbed his eyes. “Nothing’s ever easy.” He looked at Vincent. “We can’t take them on. That’s way too many. How close are we to having our guys back? The Orb?”

“They’re getting close.” Vincent checked his terminal. “Fielding is reporting to me that they’re securing the Orb right now. All marines are accounted for. They’ve requested medical aid, which is standing by in hangar two. I’d give us another ten minutes, fifteen at the most. We both know they’re cutting safety corners.”

Desmond nodded. “Salina, let me know when they start moving. At full speed, how long would it take for them to get into firing distance?”

“Twenty minutes, sir,” Salina said.

“Five minutes could be the difference between whether we live or die,” Desmond said. “I love the odds.” He scowled. “Give them the bad news. We need them back fast.”

Vincent got on the com and Salina turned to her own station, brows lifting as a hail came in from the enemy battleship. She screened it, noting they were actually seeking a parlay. “Sir . . . the Tol’An want to talk to us. They’ve opened a channel. It seems you’d be speaking to a General Trall.”

“Put him on screen.”

Salina complied, turning to see the commander of the enemy. Black hair was cropped short and two prominent scars decorated his left cheek and forehead. Stunning blue eyes peered at them through a hardened expression and he scowled as the connection established, pursing his lips before speaking.

“My name is General Trall of the Tol’An. I demand an explanation for

what has happened here and what part you played in the destruction of our people."

Desmond raised his brows. "I'm Captain Bradford, commanding the Gnosis. If you're referring to the destroyer, they seemed to have an unfortunate accident when they plowed into a boneyard. As far as the rest, I'm not sure what happened on the station yet. We're piecing that together ourselves."

"And you had nothing to do with the destruction of that vessel?"

"They did attack us prior to their accident," Desmond replied. "However, I'll tell you what. We are on the verge of leaving. Give us another few moments and you can investigate the sector to your heart's content. We won't stand in your way. Frankly, this place could use your special touch to clean it up."

Trall paused for a moment as he seemed to be listening to someone off screen. When he spoke again, his brow furrowed, making the scar on his forehead look far more sinister. "A Trindisha is floating in space here. We will be claiming it. If your shuttle is attempting to secure it, have them stand down."

"Can't do that," Desmond replied. "But I appreciate your concern. We'll take good care of it."

"We have an overwhelming force," Trall said. "If you resist, we'll destroy your ship."

"Maybe." Desmond leaned forward. "But have you thought about what would happen if we destroyed the device? Just detonated it? The energy stored in that thing holds the potential to vaporize half this system . . . maybe all of it. No one's blown one up before. Would you like to witness it right now?"

"You wouldn't dare." Trall shook his head. "No, that's why you're here. To collect that object. Just as our people were. Stand down, Captain Bradford. This is your last warning."

"If we stand down, can we get some sort of special treatment?" Desmond asked. "Maybe you can ensure we would make it home? Get my people proper medical attention? That sort of thing?"

"This conversation is ended." Trall cut the com.

"Damn." Desmond leaned back. "I hoped I could keep him talking for

a while longer. Buy us some time. Is he moving?"
Salina checked her scans. "They have started their engines and are on approach."
"The countdown has started then." Desmond turned to Vincent. "Get those people back on board fast. They do not have any time to dally. Every second will count. Zach, spin us around so we can get out of here. Plot a course for Earth. Salina, help him out. Efficiency isn't as important as getting us out of here shortly after the shuttle arrives."
"We're on it," Zach replied. Salina joined him at his station to work through it. The captain continued speaking behind her.
"Make sure everyone's ready for this. I have a feeling they'll want to strap in for this one. It might get a little rough."

***

Heat felt pressure on both sides of his head like someone was trying to crush his skull in a vice. He woke with a start, struggling against the tether holding him in place before rough hands stopped him from moving. "Settle down!" The words sounded far away but the voice was familiar. "Dude, you're fine. Just relax!"
"Gillet . . .?" Heat asked. "What the hell's going on?"
"We're trying to get the Orb secured to this shuttle so we can escape the incoming Tol'An pricks," Gillet said. "Seems they brought a fleet to back up their buddies."
"Jesus . . ." Heat turned to look outside. Gabriel was moving about the Orb, surrounding it in cargo webbing. "Captain Gabriel's in it? Wow . . . We are in trouble if he's out here."
"We came together," Fielding said. "But he's still got it. Look at him go."
The captain moved with incredible grace, using his thrusters to maneuver about the Orb like a real master. If Heat didn't know better, he would've said the CO had been doing it his whole life. *That's why he's in charge*, he thought. *The man makes everything look pretty damn easy.*
"Can we help?" Heat asked. "Anything we can do?"

“No,” Fielding replied. “He just has to finish getting it attached. We’re almost done.”
Heat turned his attention to the station. Most of the modules had separated, drifting slowly away from the whole but one, in particular, glowed orange in the seams. He focused, really staring at it for a moment before tapping the lieutenant on the arm, directing his attention to it.
“I’m scanning that,” Fielding said. He inhaled sharply a moment later. “Um . . . the power core is going critical.”
“Damn it.” Heat bowed his head.
“What’s it matter?” Vine asked. “Let the thing explode.”
“If it explodes,” Gillet explained, “then those module parts will start moving. It’ll create a bigger hazard and it could make things hard for —”
Before he could finish, the reactor blew, scattering the pieces of the engineering module in all directions. The rest of the station, even the parts mostly intact, began to rush away from the center. Two of them moved on a direct course for the shuttle, rapidly growing larger. Heat’s eyes widened as he took it in.
“Sir, you have to get back inside,” Fielding said. “Captain Gabriel, we have no time. Get back in the shuttle immediately.”
“I only have one more tether to link up.” Gabriel paused. “Shit. I see what you mean. Go. I’ll ride the Orb back to the ship.”
“That’s crazy, sir. We have to move too swiftly. It’s not safe.”
“We don’t have a choice,” Gabriel replied. “I’ll try to get this tether linked up while we’re moving.” He paused. “Pilot, take us back to the ship. Immediately.”
“Yes, sir.”
The thrusters engaged and the shuttle began to shake as it pulled away from its position. The module seemed to chase them, still closing in for several more moments. Heat swore they’d be hit, even braced himself for the impact. The pursuing piece of debris filled his field of view, blocking out all of space.
They banked to the left, pulling away and out of the object’s path. The chunk sailed by them, tumbling off into open space. Chunks seemed to

trail in its wake and one of the larger ones struck one of the two tethers securing the Orb to the shuttle. It frayed, remaining intact though only barely.

"Damn it!" Fielding stood, moving out to examine the damage. "It's pretty bad. We're going to lose it. Ideas, gentlemen?"

Gillet stepped forward. "I've got it." He took his own tether off and launched himself out to the Orb. Clinging to the one good line, he attached the line to the cargo net just as Captain Gabriel inched his way around and began back toward the shuttle. "Coming now." He started to crawl back toward the shuttle.

A rock slammed into his shoulder, knocking him to the side. He clung to the line with one hand, dangling in space. "No!" Heat got up and nearly threw himself outside but Fielding stopped him.

"We've got two men out there already, we don't need a third," Fielding said. "Captain, secure Gillet!"

Gabriel was nearly back to the shuttle but turned, using his thrusters to clear the distance. He grabbed Gillet's arm and yanked him close before pulling them both toward the shuttle. When they touched down on the ramp, Fielding attached another tether to Gillet and helped them both back to a seat.

Heat slapped Gillet's arm. "Dude, we had more lines! What were you thinking?"

"That this mission wasn't going to be a waste of men's lives," Gillet replied. "That we weren't going to lose that damn Orb. And . . . I admit . . . that was a little impulsive."

"Stupid," Gabriel said, "but it can be forgiven considering what you've probably seen today." He looked outside, gesturing to the approaching starships. "Look out at the enemy, boys. We're doing this to stop them . . . to prevent space from having the added danger of terrorists threatening your lives."

"Do you think we'll make it before they can attack us?" Vine asked.

"That's on Captain Bradford," Gabriel said. "I'm just here to pound the ground with you fellas. Everything else rests on the shoulders of the flyboys." He sat down. "Estimated time to docking?"

"Five minutes," the pilot said. "Everything secure back there? Seems

like we're having a pretty smooth time of it."
Fielding shook his head, speaking up. "Yeah, everything's just great. Total cakewalk back here. Thanks for noticing."

***

Cassie witnessed the sudden reactor meltdown on the station as it cast the modules in all directions. "That did it," she said. "The station blew up. That boneyard just got a whole lot worse . . . and this system has become a real hazard." She mapped the trajectory of the largest pieces and sent them to Zach. "We need to move."
Desmond came to her station and took a look. "It never rains but it blows up, huh?" He turned to Vincent. "Where's that shuttle? Now we've got Tol'An *and* destroyed station to worry about."
"ETA five minutes," Vincent said.
"And our hyperspace coordinates?" Desmond asked.
"We've got a decent course," Zach said. "We're just taking this extra time to optimize a little."
"Good." Desmond sat back down. "How soon before the Tol'An can start shooting?"
"Ten minutes," Cassie replied. "We should have plenty of time to get away."
"Providing nothing else goes wrong," Vincent pointed out. "Don't count on our luck just yet."
"Now's not the time for pessimism," Cassie said. "Please remain positive."
Desmond smirked at the comment. "What she said." He checked his console. "Looks like all stations are reporting ready for the hyperspace jump. Um . . . Cassie, what's going on with that shuttle? Are they *dragging* the Orb?"
She checked her scanner then rubbed her eyes. "Yes, sir. Likely they just didn't have room for the men, their power armor *and* the Orb. Pretty incredible."
Vincent chuckled. "You should just be glad the marines themselves aren't trailing behind it like they're water skiing."

“I guess there is that.” Desmond shook his head. “Start the countdown, Zach. Whatever you’ve got will have to do. Hold on tight, everyone. The second they’re confirmed onboard, I want us to jump.”

***

Trall stared at the viewscreen, willing the ship to move faster. He saw the surge of their hyperdrive, the power build up indicating they were on the verge of escape. The Trindisha was *just* within his grasp, being dragged out there in space by a lone shuttle with no backup. Yet it all remained outside of reach.

He could not give up, even in light of what might be certain defeat. Any delay might get him the prize. That could be anything from a short in the human’s equipment to the sudden destruction of the nearby station causing debris to hit their vessel. Unfortunately, he had the same concern and directed two of the destroyers to screen them.

Come, Captain Bradford. Make a single mistake. I will *exploit it.*

Scans showed the shuttle rapidly approaching the Gnosis. They would be in a firing solution in mere minutes. The race was on and Trall knew they had no choice but to push. He had engineering open the reactor, forcing it to produce thrust at over a hundred and thirty percent. It bought them a few precious seconds, perhaps enough to hit them with *something*.

Beam weapons were powered up. He ordered his weapon’s officer to prepare himself. The shuttle flew into the hangar and along with it, the Orb. Trall ordered his people to fire, to let loose with everything they had. The lights flickered overhead from the strain on the reactor, the guns going off while the engines pulled heavily to maintain their speed.

Time slowed down as the lights from their attack raced toward their target . . . and it winked out of existence, plunging into hyperspace mere moments before the attack would’ve hit. Trall slumped in his seat, feeling the weight of failure rest solely on his shoulders. They did not manage to catch them, failed to retrieve the Trindisha and lost many men.

If only we would've arrived ten minutes sooner. Trall knew there was no one to blame for their involvement, no one that could take punishment for the loss. Ezria hadn't even told him before sending the destroyer into the unknown. The fact any Tol'An arrived to witness the human victory at all was due to his quick thinking.

"Scan the area for any survivors," Trall said. "See if we can find anyone alive to salvage this mess." He knew the likelihood of saving anyone was next to nothing. The system was a total wreck but he had to try. Understanding how they lost the destroyer and the other ship would give them decent intelligence for the future.

If it ended up mattering. The humans took the final Trindisha, adding it to their collection. The Tol'An might not survive a month, depending on what their enemies chose to do next. But until that time, Trall planned to do his duty and that meant focusing on that moment, finishing his investigation . . . then reporting what happened to Ezria. The part he looked forward to the absolute least.

***

Vincent let out a cheer as they went into hyperspace and he was joined by Zach. Desmond slumped beside him with relief but he wore a big smile. They saw the attack coming, knew they had but fractions of a second to escape and they did by the skin of their teeth. With their prize.

"Congratulations, everyone," Desmond said. "We've done it. The Orb is ours and the only ones left are in the hands of the Tol'An. This war is one step closer to being over with. Good work."

"Casualty reports coming in." Salina's comment sobered the bridge. "Five marines survived the station . . . We lost one pilot to . . . to suicide."

"I want to know what happened here." Desmond turned to Cassie. "Do you think the information might be with the Orb?"

Cassie hummed. "Possibly. I'll head down and see what I can find out right now."

"Good." Desmond patted Vincent on the arm. "Head down and check

on the marines. Make sure they get medical treatment and take their report. We'll meet back up in my office in a couple hours. Zach, what's our ETA for Earth?"

"Six hours," Zach replied, "give or take a half hour. In our hurry, I can't be sure which it'll be."

"That's good enough for me," Desmond replied. "Okay, just a few more things to do before we can get some rest. Again, thank you all for your efforts today. You did fantastic. Get to it and I'll buy you all a free cup of coffee from the cafeteria. Which hopefully will *not* be burned by the time we get to it."

"No promises there," Vincent said as he approached the door. "I love that we have faster than light travel but our mess hall can't seem to get the coffee right."

"Priorities," Cassie replied. They boarded the elevator together. "Maybe when we're done trying to win a war, we can focus on some luxuries."

"It'll be nice to worry about something mundane for a change." Vincent hit the buttons for their two destinations. "And even better to be done with the fighting."

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Epilogue

Cassie didn't have to use anything special to interface with the Orb to answer Desmond's question. The basic interface used during the experiment was still in place. She had the technicians move it then she queried the thing like she'd done countless times before joining the Gnosis crew.

As with the others, it proved to be no different in design or architecture. Once she essentially plugged it in, the computer provided the same top-level interface she was accustomed to. It likely contained different information, stored from the previous culture that utilized it, but that didn't hamper her from accessing the data.

Half an hour of searching later, she pieced the story together. The culture used to live on the fourth planet of the system. While their technology advanced rapidly with the discovery of the Orb, they struggled with criminal violence. Many of their population lived beneath their poverty line, unable to make ends meet.

This led to muggings and worse. Those with extreme wealth, less than one percent of that world's population, tasked their scientists to find a solution. They turned to the Orb and developed a device to pacify violent emotions. It followed a similar principle to the culture that copied their minds to computers.

The big difference was that they generated a powerful field they could blanket whole cities with. Something went wrong. Their initial tests seemed fine but a simple tweak and accidental mass deployment sealed their fate. Instead of pacifying the people, that small change pushed them to extreme violence.

The field fed on the Orb, expanding its mindless influence over the entire planet. It caused a violent pilgrimage as millions moved to the facility where the Orb was stored. The goal was to worship it, to pay homage as their minds became consumed with savage violence and a singular goal of possessing the device.

Those few scientists who survived the initial purge and didn't succumb took the Orb into space, bringing it to their high-tech

facility. They hoped to save their planet, that by removing the object of the people's desire, they would return to normal. Unfortunately, the anomaly no longer required the Orb to keep it active.

Millions of lives did that and as they escalated the violence, they generated enough power for it to project a version of itself to the Orb. The scientists guessed it wanted to have the object returned but it didn't matter. The beings on the planet surface indulged their madness, eventually destroying the entire planet.

Those few who made it to the station succumbed to the smaller anomaly, killing each other before a final one, much like the pirate Zahl, recorded his thoughts and was slain.

It all started as a means to prevent violence but instead caused it. Cassie finished her report and prepared it for her briefing. *We've learned a lot about people going too far. I hope our people take these lessons and don't make the same mistakes*. She rubbed her eyes as Gil entered the room.

"I see you have finished." Gil sat beside her. "I'm eager to know what happened."

She told him the story, handing him her tablet so he could read some of the entries for himself. He looked down upon it, a deep frown marring his features. "I've seen many dead cultures. Several died by their own hands. The tragedy of such a thing has never gotten easier to take. Once we learn about the end, there is relief . . . then sorrow."

"We have to publish these findings," Cassie said. "Hell, someone needs to write an entire paper on what these different places have done. It will be the only way to avoid our own people going too far."

"Yes, scientists can be overly ambitious," Gil agreed. "I've written some articles on it but they were published by archaeology journals. We need to expand the scope. And we haven't even talked about the fact that this . . . field . . . survived after the people essentially shut down the source of it."

"Technology out of control." Cassie drew a deep breath. "I have to present these findings to the senior officers . . . then I'm going to sleep."

"You look like you could use it." Gil gestured to the Orb. "I think I'll stick around and probe what else we can learn about that culture.

There must be some good amongst the tragedy. There's nothing to dig up . . . nothing to collect. The sum total of their entire species is locked up in this Trindisha."

"Which is about the biggest downer I've ever heard." Cassie clapped his shoulder. "I'll leave it to you to preserve their memory. Talk to you later on, Gil. Good luck."

Cassie left, heading for the briefing room. The thought of an entire culture becoming extinct took some time to process but by the time she arrived, it really weighed heavily on her. As they investigated these places, found the Orbs, they found more and more civilizations that reached a peak . . . then toppled.

Humanity only just started up the slope but she worried about how fast they might reach the top . . . and whether or not they would fall down like the others. Those others may have advanced too quickly, gone beyond their cultural ability to absorb change. It might even explain why the Orb on Earth had gateways for them to unlock more knowledge.

Perhaps when each culture died, their Orb sent a final message to the others, building one more layer to pass through before discovering more secrets. That was something Cassie wrote down for later investigation. Probably when the conflict with the Tol'An ended and they could finally direct their attention to the mysteries of the alien technology again.

***

Christina and Essex spent the better part of three hours poring through the data they discovered. Much of it involved the logistics of moving military personnel and equipment about the globe but then, they hit pay dirt. They found the plans for the attack on Gamma Alpha and discovered a base where the vast majority of troops came from in North Africa.

Satellite photos showed an abandoned camp in the mountains but according to the logistics, an underground bunker provided refuge for the troops. They were transported by truck to an airbase then dropped

in miles away. Traveling by foot, they got into position and waited for the order to attack.

A man on the inside gave the signal, a human officer in the military. Christina had gone through all the people working there and hadn't uncovered anything. The person was referred to as *Red Corsair*, but beyond that, there was no description. That individual must've been the one who coordinated with the Tol'An, who provided the data. But that meant an infiltration from the Pahxin to a human. There was another layer of the conspiracy to uncover but they wouldn't find that data in what they stole.

Christina found account information and began a trace. This would lead her to the source of the Earth terrorists and they could arrest the ringleader, then destroy his army. But she was far more concerned with the mole in their facility, the traitor that essentially threatened their way of life.

"Red Corsair," Christina said it out loud, turning to Essex. "We've got a new lead. One that should lead us to the target."

"I thought we were after the armed forces," Essex gestured vaguely outside, "the ones the military wants to hit."

"They'll get their glorious battle," Christina replied. "I want the real traitor. That's the person responsible for all of this. By now, they could be on the Gnosis . . . They could be gone. I need your help with this. You and I are the only ones who know about Red Corsair. We're going to run the bastard to ground."

"Just say the word," Essex said. "What do I do?"

"First, I want a list of everyone that managed to leave the base since the attack. Double check their movements and where they went off to. Compile another list of everyone who hasn't come back. I want to know where they are too. Anyone who has ever worked here at Gamma Alpha and gone to North Africa? I want their names."

"Shouldn't be too many there, right?" Essex asked. "After all, no one goes to Africa for fun these days."

"You're right about that." Christina turned to her computer. "I'll send a report to Dulain about what we've discovered and let him know our investigation is continuing. By tomorrow morning, the military should

be ready to plan an operation and we'll be going through the records to find the real target."

"Shouldn't we just wait until we have the ringleader in custody?" Essex shrugged. "Seems like we could save a lot of time if we interrogate him."

"A lot can happen during an apprehension." Christina shook her head. "No, we have to assume he won't talk . . . assume he'll be accidentally shot . . . assume that we're on our own, essentially. Besides, any evidence he provides may not be true. No . . . we'll figure it out ourselves and when we're done, we'll be certain of the results."

"Thank you for bringing me in on this," Essex said. "It sure beats the analytical work I was doing before."

"Don't thank me just yet," Christina replied. "By the time we're done, you might be ready to leave the AIA. Pouring through documents isn't exactly the most thrilling part of the job, but it gets results. Anyway, you better put on a pot of coffee. We're going to be at this for a while and I don't intend to leave until we've got a lead on our colorfully titled friend."

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Gamma Strike: Legacy War Book 8

An End in Sight

Four of the six Orbs have been brought together, combined in an effort to hunt down the secret base of the dreaded Tol'An terrorists. Humanity and their allies have gathered together on Earth to discuss the final attack, combining forces to bring peace to the galaxy. It is a time of hope and anticipation.

But even as the allies stand ready, they find themselves faced with a desperate enemy, one willing to do whatever it takes to win the day. As they struggle against forces outside and in, humanity must fight like never before for the stakes have never been higher. They face the utter destruction of the planet Earth…and all of humanity with it.

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Prologue

Gizan Relik turned the collar of his coat up, bowing his head. A line formed to disembark the ratty passenger ship, one where the captain didn't ask any questions as long as he received cash. They arrived on a resource world, one where all the industry revolved around mining, logging, and cultivating the local wildlife for food.

He hoped to lay low there for a while, take stock of his resources before moving on to somewhere more permanent. The Pahxin government always had him on their most wanted list and now the Tol'An sought him as well. He hoped the latter's days were numbered but the former likely would never give up the hunt for him.

That made finding a safe system problematic. Gizan stuck to the fringe of society, places where a man might blend in and disappear. By doing so, he evaded the authorities and kept himself out of danger. The galaxy should've been big enough to avoid unwanted contact but that hadn't proven to be the case.

The first planet he attempted to visit, he thought would be perfect. Small population, rarely bothered by any authorities, and the Tol'An never bothered with it. Unfortunately, he stuck out in the close-knit community and their local lawman tried to apprehend him. That resulted in a murder and a stolen shuttle.

That incident taught him he needed bigger crowds to blend into, the types of people who had their own problems and didn't want to bother with someone else's. He needed hard workers, the type that pushed themselves in the morning so that by the evening, they were too exhausted to be nosey.

When he arrived on the new planet, he intended to dig in and hide. If he left one of the main camps, he'd have the opportunity to enjoy some isolation, to figure things out. A chance to sleep without worrying about being stabbed sounded nice. He hadn't been able to rest comfortably since before Ezria imprisoned him for his failure to capture the ambassadors.

The line started moving and Gizan stepped down the ramp, departing

from the others as soon as he had room to do so. No one looked up from their shoes as they moved off to whatever assignment waited for them. He envied some of them, wondered what it would be like to have so little to focus on.

Gizan never had a normal life. He'd been trained by the Pahxin from a young age to be a special operative, a man capable of fighting for his people. He met Calatha Dervia during his formative years, the founder of the Tol'An, and embarked on a journey that changed him forever. Becoming the blade of a new movement granted him power and prestige, the sort of admiration a young person craved. The killing never bothered him. His only desire was to see the will of his master done, to know that he had successfully performed his duty and forwarded the goals of his organization.

Ezria changed all that. The man seemed to understand the best way to do his job, to take the Tol'An to the next level but he proved to be petty. His understanding of sentient behavior left much to be desired. He imprisoned for small infractions, killed for others and never got his own hands dirty.

He was the worst kind of ruler, selfish and cruel. Ezria rarely made his vision clear but he acted as if it must be followed to the exclusion of all else. That was how Calatha differed. He always painted a clear image of what the future held and what it would take to get there. Others followed because they were inspired, not blindly devoted.

After imprisonment, Gizan knew he was in the wrong place. The Tol'An had gone down a path he could no longer follow. Those who worked for their new masters did so out of fear, not zeal but they couldn't tell the difference. It worked in some ways however, once the Pahxin considered them a credible threat, they needed real passion to succeed.

Beyond the passion to survive and serve.

The crowd began to thin. Gizan moved to the edge of the room, peering back at the people around him. They continued to keep their heads down, none of them so much as sparing him a glance. That suited him perfectly. It meant he could get out of there without incident. The best part was he saw no one resembling the law

lingering about.
In fact, there were no weapons at all. That part seemed odd though even Gizan traveled with only a pair of blades for self-defense. The types of transports he hopped on didn't check people but open firearms weren't allowed onboard. He'd seen what happened to one spacer who tried to bring a massive pistol with him.
They tossed him out and he had to wait for the next ship.
The spaceport was a fabricated complex with three landing pads. The steepled roof overhead provided some cover from the elements. A dirt path led away from the structure into a town of square buildings, each one made of metal and covered in moss. People conducted business down there, milling about.
Apparently, they'd arrived near quitting time for the average worker in that region. That suited Gizan. He blended in with a crowd that headed toward the town, keeping his head down as he walked. People bumped into him to the left and right but he'd become accustomed to being in such close proximity to strangers.
Still, he remained cautious, maintaining his situational awareness. Someone joined their ranks the moment the crowd passed them, two men who were far too clean to be average workers. The fact they hurried to catch up bothered Gizan but he didn't dare to look back over his shoulder at them. No one else showed signs of curiosity. He couldn't either.
Voices muttered comments behind him, people saying *excuse me* here and there. He figured the two people must've been trying to shove their way to the front of the group but why bother? They were moving at a brisk pace. Rushing wouldn't get them there too much further and the ground was slick anyway.
A man would fall if he moved too fast.
They reached the bottom of the hill. Gizan glanced over his shoulder, noting the two men staring directly at him. *How did they find me?* The thought infuriated him. He had been careful. Cash only, using destitute captains and ships on the verge of falling apart. The fringes of society had become his home and yet, here he was faced with another attack.

Worse, he couldn't tell if they were Pahxin authorities or Tol'An murderers. Their allegiance only mattered when it came to how fast they could call in reinforcements. The former would have access to a ship which could travel freely. It might've even been in orbit already. The latter needed to remain stealthy.

They weren't in control of the universe yet.

Gizan picked up the pace, pushing to the front of the group. Once there, he broke away, moving for the first building on his left. It appeared to be a general store, one that sold tools and clothing. He entered the thirty by thirty space. Shovels sat on the wall nearest him and he grabbed one, hefting the weight in his hands.

Clothing racks took up the center of the space. Smaller tools climbed up the wall on the right. A counter where people could transact business sat opposite the door and a Pahxin woman manned it. She eyed him suspiciously and when he turned in her direction, she cleared her throat.

"Can I help you?" She asked.

"No one can," Gizan replied. He turned his attention to the door as two shadows darkened the entry. He held the shovel at the ready. The first of his pursuers stepped into the room and he swung high, catching the man in the face with flat metal. A high-pitched metallic ding rang out as the man's feet flew out from under him and he landed on his back.

His friend reached into his jacket. Gizan stabbed him with the pointy end of his spade, driving him into the wall. Pressing all of his weight into the attack, he felt the shovel meet bone through the gut. Blood burst from the victim's mouth, his eyes closed in tight pain a few moments before he slumped, dead.

The woman screamed. A hand grabbed Gizan's foot. He turned to look at the man on the ground, flailing about with his eyes rolling back in his skull. "We found you …" he muttered. "Lord Ezria has put … a price … you are a traitor! A filthy … miserable … traitor. You're going to die. It's only a matter of time."

"Tol'An then." Gizan ripped his makeshift weapon free and pressed it to the man's throat. "I owe you thanks. It seems that escape was not

an option after all. I appreciate you making that abundantly clear."
"No …" The man flailed his arms again. "Please … I was only …"
Gizan stomped on the shovel, feeling it cut deep into the man's neck. The body stiffened then flopped. "Following orders?" He asked. "Yes, I'm sure we've all used that excuse from time to time. It doesn't save anyone. This is all you would've had to look forward to. Death for a failure. Regardless of how many successes you returned."
He turned to the woman who stared at him with wide-eyed horror. She trembled behind the counter, petrified. "I … please …" She held up her hands. "I don't have any idea who you are. I won't tell anyone. Just … don't hurt me. Please, don't."
"I won't." Gizan approached the counter. He dropped some cash, tapping it three times. "For the shovel. I doubt anyone will want to buy that one. I included some extra to make up for the inconvenience. I know it won't help erase what you had to see but I assure you, those men deserved what they got."
"I'm sure I don't know."
"No. But when your authorities check them, they'll find they are terrorists working for the Tol'An." Gizan knew he didn't have any time. He needed to return to the port, to force the captain to get him out of there. The law would be interested in putting the man away who savagely murdered two people with a digging implement. "Good luck … and again, I'm sorry."
Gizan stepped outside, walking calmly back the way he came up the hill. Everyone continued to mind their own business but he knew that discipline was about to break down. Once they knew they had a murderer to contend with, they would all get in on the gossip. Until someone was caught, safety would be in question.
He'd seen the same in several places all over the galaxy. The moment routine broke, those living in its embrace tended to panic. Unfortunately for those living in the immediate area, they would not get any closure. The killer wasn't going to be brought to justice and so they would be left to wonder.
Gizan boarded the ship again, heading to the small bridge. He drew one of his concealed blades, creeping silently along the metal grated

floor. The doors were open ahead and he saw a lone man sitting in the pilot's seat, counting money. An open metal box sat nearby, stacks of cash haphazardly lying inside.

Pressing the blade against the man's neck, Gizan leaned in close. He could smell sweat and fear on the man, body odor from days aboard without washing. "I'm afraid I need your help again, captain. What is your name?"

"Er … um …" The man stiffened but kept his hands still. "Rythi. I'm Captain Rythi. There's no need for the weapon."

"I can't be sure about that but I'm pleased to meet you. We have somewhere to go but I won't be able to pay you, not right away. It's a rather urgent request as well so I'll give you the coordinates after we've launched. I'm sure you understand. You've likely had to leave many places quickly."

"What do you want?"

"We need to go. I've got a destination. Upon arrival, you'll be handsomely rewarded but it will be dangerous."

"How handsomely?"

Gizan smiled at the greed in Rythi's voice. "Whatever legal troubles have you working the fringe lanes will be over."

"How dangerous?"

"Now you're worried about that?" Gizan drew back. "Have you heard of the Tol'An?"

"Who hasn't? Those maniacs have made it hard for honest traders in some parts of the galaxy." Rythi shook his head. "Haven't hit me yet. I've stayed out of their way."

"Then to answer your question, we'll be stepping directly in their way … and taking care of them once and for all." Gizan patted his shoulder. "Look on the bright side. You'll be hailed as a hero. The man who assisted in the downfall of the greatest terrorist organization to plague the galaxy."

"And you can do that?"

Gizan's eyes flashed. "I *will* do it."

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Chapter 1

Cassandra Alexander stared out the window of the descending shuttle, peering at the empty landscape. Gamma Alpha was situated on the left and the supporting town only a couple miles away but to her right, mountains and forest stretched out as far as the eye could see.

The terrain offered a fantastic cover for the force that attacked them while they transported the Orb. That had been before they secured two more. Intelligence called the organization an Earth-based terrorist organization but they seemed far too organized for that. In Cassie's mind, she considered them a hostile militia at least.

Army seemed more appropriate. Someone paid big to get them into position, to gather the intelligence of just when to attack. Christina Dawson had been assigned to investigate but no report made it to the Gnosis yet. Of course, they had only just arrived in orbit and were sending down their final prize: the last Orb known to be in the wild.

Completing the last mission took a toll on the men. Several marines died, including an entire team. A Pahxin technical crew also lost their lives not to mention countless scavengers, raiders, pirates and Tol'An operatives. She thought back on the report she wrote for the AIA and shivered.

The previous culture attempted to pacify their population, to take care of rampant crime and chaos. Instead, they made something deadly and it ended their entire race, destroying their planet in the process. Only a space station survived and with it, the technology which continued to thrive and kill anyone who visited.

How many other booby traps are out there waiting to be discovered by an unsuspecting crew? Cassie didn't want to think too much about it.

When they finished the war with the Tol'An, she planned on offering a recommendation to the AIA that a crew be assigned to travel about, looking for those types of threats to quell them.

Knowing my luck, they'll assign me to that team. Cassie wasn't sure what she wanted to do when it all ended. She had been assigned to the Gnosis as a specialist on Orb technology and ended up part of the

crew. They accepted her as one of their own but the things she'd done, the trials she endured went above and beyond the call of duty. Retirement wasn't an option, not at her age but there had to be something else she could do with herself that didn't involve running such risky operations. Christina had survived years of fieldwork and seemed okay. Then again, she never had a psychic connection with an Orb before.

And Cassie managed to do it several times. Not to mention the encounters out in the middle of nowhere with ancient cultures all lost to the seas of time. Their legacies tended to be deadly, broken machinery or simply monotonous automation left to continue protocols without sentient guidance.

Captain Desmond Bradford seemed to believe they would become explorers when the conflict was over, that they would finally fulfill the destiny the ship had been built for in the first place. Cassie wanted to be cautiously optimistic but the Tol'An represented only one threat they faced in the cosmos.

The Kalrawv Group, vicious corporate stooges bent on exploiting alien relics, remained in effect. Their public face couldn't be holding up after the things they'd done but Cassie knew how big businesses operated. They were slippery and knew the laws sometimes better than those who made them.

They would remain out there, causing trouble for the foreseeable future.

Then there were the raiders and pirates. They represented a varying degree of danger depending on how well funded they were. Whoever traveled beyond Earth's borders would need to contend with them as well, defending themselves from those types of threats no matter where they went.

Even without a boogeyman, the universe would remain a scary place. The threat itself would be harder to identify, but it would be there. Until the next group rose up with ideas of conquest and subjugation. Such things were inevitable. Earth's own history proved it time and again.

Someone always believed they knew better than the current ruling

party and then, the seeds of rebellion would sprout.
I'm feeling particularly cynical today. Cassie sighed and turned to her tablet, looking over the meetings she had planned for the day. Several people wanted her time, from Doctor Harper's crew to her own leadership to the admiral and even … The last entry gave her pause. Her sister arrived at Gamma Alpha and wanted to see her.
That's a surprise. Tammy had been in college when Cassie joined the Gnosis crew. They hadn't spoken in all that time and rarely wrote.
Why would she come here? What could she possibly need? The fact her own family had to schedule time to talk spoke of how busy her schedule was.
Cassie accepted all the meeting requests and flipped through her messages. Beaumont Dulain sent her three separate requests to ensure she would be at their meeting. She replied to him that she would as soon as she saw the Orb secured. Four marines sat around her, each in their power armor to escort the device to its new home.
What did he expect me to do? Skip it? Sometimes, she wondered if Dulain knew he was in charge. Then she thought about how many agents must've skipped key meetings with their superiors to warrant his insistent curiosity. Christina had a different relationship with the man, the type that involved speaking far more plainly than Cassie ever would've.
Of course, they'd worked together for years so perhaps they paved the way for frank conversation. Cassie saw Dulain exactly three times in person before she joined the Gnosis and each of those were during large meetings with her entire department present. The first time they met in private, she'd been scared out of her mind.
Spending time with him became far easier. He'd become demystified, shown to be a regular person for the most part. His methods left something to be desired in her mind, especially since he didn't act like the most professional individual. Cassie felt they could be more open with their allies. Dulain wanted them to play things close to the chest. This included her interactions with the Gnosis crew. Dulain gave her all sorts of powers she had yet to exercise, including the ability to take command should the need arise. Fortunately, she'd never felt it

necessary, never pushed Captain Bradford with the authority. In fact, she told him about it.

Cassie wanted to ensure a positive relationship remained between her and the people she relied on to keep her alive. Giving them cause to forsake her for any reason seemed stupid. They didn't have any particular allegiance to her, nothing beyond the camaraderie forged from working together.

The last thing she needed was to bust out a secret during a stressful situation and risk an argument at a critical moment. She'd seen how quickly choices had to be made to preserve the lives of everyone on board the Gnosis. Anything that interrupted that process could have been fatal.

Everyone had a job for a reason and they were entrusted to do it properly. That included Captain Bradford. Whether Dulain liked it or not, the man was in charge for a reason. He had exhibited the necessary traits to act as a leader, a person who knew what was best for the mission he'd been given.

If Dulain wanted to alter the parameters, he should've gone through proper channels. Cassie believed that Bradford would've done whatever the AIA wanted providing their goals were written into the operational requirements. Of course, the intelligence agency wanted to remain secretive so they played games.

"Landing in less than five minutes," the pilot spoke up. "Guards are on hand to escort the Orb in. Be on your guards, folks. The base is on yellow status. They sound pretty stressed down there."

Great, so they're worried about another attack. Cassie sighed. She tried to dial up Christina, to see if she might establish a com with the woman. It pinged six times before connecting.

"Cassie?" Christina's voice came in loud and clear. "Welcome back! Are you onboard the shuttle coming down?"

"Thanks, I am," Cassie replied. "Are you on security detail?"

"No, I'm fully invested in taking care of our local trouble," Christina said. "We had a breakthrough. I'm pretty sure we know where the enemy's hanging out but the real traitor, that's who I'm after. Do you have any news you'd like to share on that front? We're pouring

through roughly seven hundred personnel files so if you can fast-track us, that would be great."
"I'm afraid not. We were up to our ears in work while we were gone. You won't even believe what happened. In any event, we're about to touchdown and I wanted to see if you'd be there when we landed."
"So you got the Orb then?"
Cassie smiled. "We sure did … though …" She sighed. "It wasn't entirely easy. And we paid a big price for it. Still, it's here right? That's all that matters."
"No," Christina said. "Maybe I believed that when I was young, but it's hard to say the ends justify the means. Sometimes, they don't. Even when they do, there's not much comfort to be had in losing lives for it. I started thinking of it as lost potential … the chance for people to have families, grow old, make the world a better place … probably not super healthy."
"Not for your state of mind." Cassie looked outside again. The ground grew ever closer. "I'm assuming I'll get a chance to see you in some meeting or other, right? Dulain isn't going to keep you sequestered away the whole time I'm here, right?"
"You think you're leaving again soon?"
"Once they use the four Orbs to find the last two, we'll have the location of the Tol'An," Cassie explained. "And yeah, between us and the Pahxin, I'm pretty sure we're going to go in and finish them off. Don't you think?"
"I wouldn't be surprised if the Gnosis sits that out," Christina replied. "After all, it's not a warship. A bunch of battles doesn't change that fact. Yeah, you've done amazing but I think the brass might want to preserve what we've got left. Don't quote me on any of that though. I'm just a grunt doing a job."
"Yeah, I'm sure you haven't been considered that for years." Cassie shook her head. "Anyway, we'll see. And I'm sure we'll talk soon. Thanks for picking up. Cassandra out." She tapped her tablet and braced herself for the final approach. As the landing gear deployed, the deck rumbled for a moment just seconds before the retro rockets kicked in.

The ship jostled about as they made the final descent. Landing gear sunk as it connected with the tarmac. Hydraulics hissed around them and the marines rose in an instant, stamping to the door. Cassie disengaged her safety belt and stood back, allowing them to open the ramp and storm out.

They secured the area, met up with the escorts, and planned their path to get the payload to where it belonged. Cassie followed along, drawing a deep breath of Earth air. It felt nice to be back, even if it meant throwing herself into a busy schedule of meetings and conversations.

And seeing Tammy, Cassie thought. *The strangest and possibly hardest part of all this. I hope everything's okay. The last thing I want is a little family drama just before we head out to save the galaxy.*

***

Captain Desmond Bradford remained on the bridge of the Gnosis, overseeing the arrival of tech crews from Earth. Preparation for the final fight with the Tol'An began the second they arrived back in system, including some tweaks to the weapons systems, defenses, and reactor. The hope was to get two shots off before the generators had to recharge.

Admiral Reach contacted him the moment they left hyperspace as if he'd been sitting on the com with a constant ping heading their way. The eagerness was not one-sided. Desmond looked forward to giving them the good news. Even with the number of losses they experienced, their success pushed them one step closer toward finishing the war.

The key was whether or not the four orbs would provide them the means to find the final two. If they could do that, then the attack on the Tol'An headquarters would commence. The full might of the Pahxin and Earth's own ship would swoop down upon them. With such an overwhelming force, the fight should've been single sided.

Desmond worried more about the Kalrawv Group than the Tol'An. They seemed to be a real threat, one that operated under the noses of

the authorities. Of course, the law couldn't be everywhere and it was clear by the way the Pahxin treated them during one of their earlier operations that they didn't enjoy any sort of special status.

He hoped his people would push hard to have the organization investigated properly once the Tol'An were contended with. They shouldn't be allowed to roam the galaxy, exploiting resources for their own gain at any time. He found it reprehensible, especially since they had no qualms about kidnapping people to complete their projects. Even the people who willingly worked for them didn't make out all that great. Those people were little more than indentured servants, making low wages in terrible conditions. He was surprised they weren't forced to use corporate vouchers for their food and equipment, made to pay for their rooms.

Commander Vincent Bowman joined him on the bridge, sitting heavily in the chair beside him. The blond man rubbed his eyes before speaking. "I've been to engineering. They're all ready for the techs to show up. Everything's clean at least. Hangar bay's all cleared out. Replacement fighters will be ready in a couple hours."

"Great news," Desmond said. "Now, let's hope they figure out where we're going fast. I don't want to sit around here any longer than we have to."

"What did Reach have to say?"

Desmond shrugged. "He's anxious but there's nothing any of us can do to hurry things along. So I told him we'd do what we could with the ship while Doctor Harper's team works with the Orbs. Keep us all busy this way *and* we don't have to be down there to see the poor man pace a hole in his floor."

Vincent smirked. "We need to get these techies aboard so our crew can get some rest. That last one … we can't expect them to jump right back in. We need a day, three would be better. Especially for the marines. They took it hard in that last run. And our pilots definitely need some downtime."

"We've been pushing hard, I agree." Desmond leaned forward and rubbed his face. "I just don't know how long it'll be before we have to go. It could happen fast. And if it does, we can't have our people all

over the place. They need to be in close proximity, ready to get back to the Gnosis at a moment's notice."
"Then to Gamma Alpha at least," Vincent said. "We'll have shuttles on standby but I'm telling you, these guys have given us over a hundred percent. They need to recharge."
Desmond nodded. "Okay, I agree. Set up a schedule. Prioritize the marines and pilots. And make sure you take some time yourself. I'm sure you and Cassie can find a couple minutes to hang out together."
Vincent's cheeks turned red. "Yeah, well … things might be getting a little serious you know?" He shrugged. "At least, I'm hoping so. Wouldn't hurt my feelings at least."
"Careful," Desmond said. "Intelligence agents might not be the best choice for dating."
"I don't think she's going to stick with it." Vincent shook his head. "Wouldn't surprise me if she got out as soon as this is over."
"I've met her type. They don't quit. This is what she's trained for and it's what she's going to do until they kick her out. Hell, I bet she ends up with Dulain's job at some point. She's got better ethics than he does at least. Might be the best thing that ever happened to the AIA, to be honest."
"You know what she's been through," Vincent replied. "All that crap with getting *into* the Orb? That's enough to shake anyone."
"Yes …" Desmond nodded. "But she's also been through too much to throw in the towel. I'm telling you, she's got ambition. And once this is over and she can take a minute to breathe, she's going to be all in. Just be ready. If things get serious, you might end up with a career politician on your hands. Besides, I thought you wanted a command."
"I do … I did." Vincent sighed. "All the things we've seen have made me second guess my calling, I suppose. Like you say, maybe when things are all over I'll have a change of heart. Right now … right now, I'm just tired." He smirked. "Don't get me wrong, I'm all in to see this through. But afterward, I'm hoping for some real leave."
"If all goes according to plan," Desmond said, "shouldn't be a problem." His com went off and he established the connection. "Captain Bradford."

“Hey, it’s Cassie. Orb’s secure. They’re connecting them up to the network right now. ETA two hours.”
“Were your ears burning?” Desmond asked, glancing at Vincent.
“Sir?” Cassie paused. “Oh. I’m doing alright if that was the topic of conversation.”
“Nah. Just gossiping up here. Do we need to do anything to help?”
“No, Doctor Harper’s team is on it. I’m going to meetings until they’re ready to try some things then I’ll throw myself into that for a bit. I’ve decided I’ll be stopping at seventeen-hundred though. Even if these guys plan on going all night, I’d like to get a decent night of rest on our first day back.”
“I endorse that decision.” Desmond pursed his lips. “Vincent will be on his way down in the next half hour if you need him for anything. Feel free to link up with his com. He shouldn’t have anything scheduled either since it was a bit spontaneous. I’m sure he has a unique perspective that could come in handy with the Orbs.”
“Oh …” Cassie sounded surprised and a touch relieved. “That would be lovely. Sometimes, these folks forget what we’ve done. It’s nice to have backup when explaining our missions.”
“Then that works perfectly. Talk to you soon, Cassie. Desmond out.” He turned to Vincent. “You’re welcome.”
“Sir, I haven’t put together the leave schedule. I’ve got a dozen things to take care of.”
“Don’t worry about it. I can make a schedule. Besides, you were one of the people who needed leave, remember?”
“What about you?”
Desmond chuckled. “The fact I’m not sitting in Admiral Reach’s office is vacation enough for me right now. Seriously, get out of here. Take a shuttle down and spend some time with that woman. Maybe I’m wrong about her and if I am, then you can’t ignore any opportunity. You know what I mean?”
“I do … thank you.” Vincent went to the elevator and paused. “You’re absolutely sure?”
“I’m about to change my mind,” Desmond teased. “Get out of here, Commander.”

Once Vincent left, Desmond turned back to his terminal. Reports came in from engineering. Tech crews had arrived and were starting in on the upgrades. Replacement ships were being stowed and checked over to ensure they were safe. Medical moved injured crew down to the surface.

They didn't have an ETA on when the upgrades would be completed but none of the proposals looked particularly complicated. He brought up the personnel roster, scheduling leave for the crew. The tricky part was finding enough shuttles to ferry them back and forth in a timely fashion.

Ground control offered a solution, providing him with an additional three shuttles to get his people down there. An hour later, Desmond leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms. That task completed, he wasn't sure what else to do but be available. He went through every alert, saw they were for different section chiefs, and settled in for a boring few hours.

Better than exciting, Desmond thought. *Maybe this is all the rest I need.*

There was something to be said about quiet time on the bridge. No one shooting at them, no one being shot on some alien planet surface. Just the curve of the Earth beyond the view screen and the quiet activities of Deacon on the helm.

It had been the first time he did not have to immediately rush back to Gamma Alpha for briefings and meetings, conversations and other engagements. Much like his advice given to Vincent, he decided he'd take what pleasure he could from the moment. He ordered up some coffee, planning to enjoy the peace and quiet. While it lasted.

***

Beaumont Dulain found himself running around like he'd been caught on fire. So many different departments wanted his attention, he started to feel like he'd taken a demotion. Those directly beneath him were just as busy, just as consistently occupied with meetings and briefings. The AIA had never been tapped so hard in the past.

With the end of the Tol'An drawing near, the Pahxin intelligence

community brought a full department to Earth. Their aim was to assist with deciphering any information drawn from the extra Orbs. Their expertise proved invaluable in regular espionage as well. They brought back information from all parts of the galaxy as spies hunted for clues.

One, in particular, involved a high-level breach in Tol'An ranks. Dulain just finished a briefing where one of the Pahxin told them that a key member of the terrorist elite had gone AWOL, departing the organization. The deserter found himself pursued by the law as well as his former comrades.

The Pahxin government hoped to enlist him for aid against the Tol'An. He undoubtedly knew a great deal about their infrastructure, including the location of their headquarters. Unfortunately, he didn't allow anyone to talk to him, turning violent upon each confrontation. He'd left a trail of bodies from the Kalrawv mining operation to outposts on the fringe.

Dulain learned more about the Tol'An in general, about their original founder Calatha Dervia. He'd been a thoughtful, peaceful politician who radicalized after his family died. He originally envisioned his new group to be a lawful group meant to bring about change to society, to teach values which would ultimately assuage crime.

He quickly found his fellows were not prepared to give up so many freedoms for his dream and took his followers off world. Most of them were fanatics, zealots who suffered in a similar manner. Intelligence suggested Calatha died at some point and one of his faithful took over. A change in tactics was their first clue.

Initially, the Tol'An used guerrilla tactics, hitting hard and leaving before a proper response could be leveraged. After Calatha, they adopted a military mindset, meaning open engagements. Some of them were successful, especially after they managed to convert several high-ranking military officials.

Others proved disastrous as poor leaders were given charge of complex operations. The question Dulain had was why did the Tol'An have so many people working for them? What allure did they have to adopt such a following? Especially with their current leadership

proving to be little more than a power crazed maniac.
At least that's how the reports painted him. Ultimately, it wouldn't matter. The combined force of Earth and the Pahxin would be down on their organization soon enough and the threat of the terrorist group would be mostly over. Statistics showed that at least thirty percent of their forces would remain combat effective elsewhere in the galaxy.
Leaderless and without supply, they would become raiders and pirates. Dulain proposed a special unit to hunt them down, an organization that could persist after the threat had been neutralized for other such issues. The reports from the Gnosis proved criminals were just as much of a problem as the more overt groups.
His Pahxin counterparts agreed and they insisted they would take the suggestion to their government. Dulain went above his authority by offering up an Earth ship to join that group, though they had yet to build it. He wanted in on, to ensure humanity held representation in any capacity possible.
Dulain met with his boss early that morning. Their goal was to go over some options of who they planned on recommending for an ambassador position with the Pahxin. He was surprised to see his own name on the list and quickly removed himself. They would be suspicious of his presence on the planet.
After all, he'd done with them, they would have to assume he was spying on them. No amount of talking them down would prove otherwise. They needed a man or woman without ties to the intelligence community. He recommended Admiral Reach. The man already proved himself to them several times. He exemplified human integrity.
Whether or not Reach wanted to live on an alien world was another matter entirely.
All of that came about and Dulain barely had an opportunity to speak with Christina about her investigation. He knew that she was tapping military resources while examining every personnel record on Gamma Alpha but beyond that, he had a pile of reports he hadn't read. At least she seemed to be effective but he wouldn't know until they

talked.
The human insurrectionists needed to be taken out of the equation as soon as possible. They held the advantage of anonymity, meaning their operations could take place at any time without warning. Christina managed to grab considerable intel from them. If the military didn't lay into something soon, Dulain would be surprised.
Then finally, a fourth Orb had been delivered to Earth. He couldn't wait to speak to Doctor Harper and her people. They hadn't even been able to fully explore the benefit of having three of the devices but now, with four of them he anticipated great things. Doctor Thayne Rindala of the Pahxin stated they never had so many in one place. This gave them both a major advantage and a dilemma. The Pahxin allowed them to keep the devices because of the collective expertise on the planet surrounding the technology. But other organizations may have seen them as a prize. For this reason, the Pahxin stationed three battleships around Earth to help keep them safe.
Their presence made some of the military nervous. If relations broke down, nothing would stop them from trashing the planet and taking whatever they wanted. Dulain used to share their concerns but after working closely with them, he changed his tune. They were a people with integrity and would use diplomacy before violence.
The second problem that worried authorities came down to the destructive power of the Orbs. As an energy source, it was a well-known fact they carried the capability to annihilate large sections of any planet they happened to be stationed on. Doctor Harper helpfully provided the figures to her superiors who in turn terrified the military. With all four Orbs in one place, they were capable of destroying the planet. Technically, the majority of the continent would be decimated along with a large chunk that would send the rest of the world into a cataclysmic event. Nothing would survive. The sun itself exploding wouldn't do the job much better.
This meant Reach's team had to justify keeping the devices together for their research, to show that the risk was worth the reward. Dulain attempted to help but he didn't have any data to backup his belief. Some suggested they move the devices off-world, to find a place that

wouldn't matter if it exploded.
Timing prevented that discussion from going too far. They needed to find the Tol'An and finish them off. Doing so required the Orbs. Afterward, Dulain figured the Pahxin would want theirs back. Harper proved that they could be used as instantaneous communication devices. This meant that at one time there were likely six cultures cooperating throughout the galaxy.
The question of what happened to them had been partially answered by Cassandra Alexander when she psychically connected with one of the Orbs on the way back from their first mission. Technology gone wild brought about a terrifying end to multiple systems. A computer virus that must've gone dormant or no longer found perch in modern equipment.
Dulain privately looked forward to bringing all six of the Orbs together, to see if that unlocked something special. He assumed it would. The ones who could build such wonders intrigued him. He wanted to know more. That was the exploration he found himself most invested in. Not discovering new worlds, but the secrets of the past.
Where had those people gone? So far, the Gnosis encountered a planet where the inhabitants copied their minds into computers and another where the population mutated into tribal, cannibal beasts. Had the designers of the Orbs suffered a similar fate? Or was this their legacy, the last vestige of their contribution to the galaxy?
A message popped up on his tablet, indicating Cassie had arrived well over an hour earlier. He'd wanted to be there when she arrived, to talk about their previous mission and see the final Orb himself. He canceled his next two meetings, asking them to reschedule before rushing off to the tech lab.
Gamma Alpha became Dulain's new home. When things settled down, he committed to visiting his house on the west coast of North America. Vacation seemed like a dirty word but if he didn't get some downtime in, he knew he'd lose his edge. Well, more than half the people at the base were in the same boat.
What this meant was that Dulain rarely found time to escape the

constant barrage of requests. He'd return to his quarters only to find people waiting for him with questions or concerns. Privacy became a luxury he no longer enjoyed. He doubted he would know what to do with it if he got it.

Cassie just stepped out of the lab when he arrived.

"What's going on?" Dulain asked. "Have they hooked them up?"

"They're working on it," Cassie replied. "Won't be long before they're able to run some tests. Then it's up to Gil and me to see what we can come up with."

"The device still isn't ready? The one that you guys discovered on your trip?"

Cassie shook her head. "Not yet. They've fabricated the parts but putting it together has been challenging … at least in a way that the power source doesn't burn out instantly. They complained about cooling but I backed out of the conversation, to be honest."

"I understand." Dulain frowned, then realized he'd gone straight business mode. "I'm sorry, how're you doing? How was the last mission? I haven't had a chance to read your report yet."

"I'm fine," Cassie replied, "but the mission was rough. I'll let you read about it. Suffice to say, a lot of people died to bring us back this Orb."

"Risk and reward," Dulain grumbled. "I used to be able to talk about that with far less cynicism but lately, I've been losing my stomach for it. Christina's had a few breakthroughs. I haven't kept up with her reports either but I feel certain she's close. She's got a new agent who's eager to make a name for himself."

"I talked to her on the way down," Cassie replied. "They are close."

"Great! So …" Dulain clapped his hands. "Do you want lunch? I'd be happy to get you out of the limelight for a while so you can enjoy some downtime with food. If that's on the agenda."

"I can't. I've got plans with Commander Bowman."

Dulain lifted his brows. "Really. So that's persisting. You guys … making a go of it."

"We have been," Cassie replied. She lifted her chin. "I don't think it's a problem …"

"No, not at all. It certainly hasn't cut into your effectiveness at all."

Dulain smiled. “I’m happy for you honestly. In the middle of all this madness, it’s hard to remember that we’re still people. Connections are important. We need them. I’m glad you found one on this trip, especially since we thought those military types would’ve shunned you for being AIA.”

“I’d like to think I was too charming for all that.” Cassie smiled this time. “That was a serious joke. I’ve got about as much charm as an ant line at a picnic. I don’t know what Vincent … Commander Bowman sees in me, to be honest. I went aboard all business and … well … this is what came about.”

“I find it funny,” Dulain said, “that you know so much about an alien technology but so little about how relationships work. Didn’t you date in school? Secondary, I mean. Not at AIA training.”

“No … not really. I …” Cassie shrugged. “I was focused.”

“To the exclusion of normalcy.” Dulain patted her shoulder. “Anyway, connections happen when you’re least expecting and always when you’re *not* looking for them. I doubt your commander thought he’d end up like this when he boarded the Gnosis. Especially when the war with the Tol’An broke out.”

“Maybe so.” Cassie checked her tablet. “Sorry, I’ve got to go …”

“Go ahead.” Dulain waved his hand down the hall. “I’m going to visit with Doctor Harper and see what trouble I can get into with the tech lab. Have fun. Relax a little bit. Until they’ve got these things talking, there’s no reason for you to come back. Consider that an order from your superior, huh?”

“Thank you.” Cassie rushed off down the hall. Dulain watched her go, letting out a sigh. When he first met her, he thought she might be too earnest for the work they were assigning her. She remained too squeaky clean for some AIA work but it ended up making her good at working with the Gnosis crew.

Reports spoke highly of her. Captain Bradford gave excellent ratings for her performance. Christina enjoyed working with her when they worked out security detail for transporting the two Orbs in one of their operations. By all rights, Dulain felt like he’d made the right call elevating her to senior agent level.

Depending on how she did in the next operation, she may well be able to write her own ticket. Politics weren't out of the question. She'd already attracted the eye of several key personnel high up in different government organizations. Dulain talked about her whenever he could. She was his benevolent eye, watching the military situation unfold.

He half thought his superiors might try to replace him with someone like her. If that was the case, he wouldn't feel too bad. Especially after everything he'd been through lately. The bureaucracy was starting to wear him down and that said a lot considering how much of it he himself put in place.

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Chapter 2

Christina sat with Sandoval Essex, the fresh agent who she allied herself with for her current investigation. He'd proven to be a tireless worker but even their combined efforts were making slow work of diving into the various personnel files. They couldn't lock the base down after the assault, not while keeping it running effectively.

So that meant a lot of people came and went and any one of them could've been Red Corsair, the traitor that sold out the timing for transporting the Orbs. No one had any illusions that such a person was done. They would strike again. Whether that meant another open assault or something subtle, that remained to be seen.

Essex felt as if they narrowed the list of potential suspects down to twenty. That still seemed like a lot. Only five of them were currently in Gamma Alpha. The others remained at whatever post took them away in the first place. They were singled out because they had protracted contact with various Pahxin agents.

Christina hesitated to call upon her Pahxin counterparts. She worried about who to pick, who to trust. Unfortunately, they wouldn't have a choice for long. A Tol'An agent had infiltrated the ranks of their allies and if they didn't root that individual out, they could just develop another asset.

"You know …" Christina turned to Essex. "I was just thinking. If we talked to the Pahxin, if we rooted out their traitor, we might find our own. Depending on their interrogation techniques, that is. We might at least eliminate a few options. This is a lot of people to go through. Hell, we practically need to interview them all."

"But if we tip off the agent …"

Christina waved her hand at him. "Yes, I know. I thought of that too but at some point, we're not going to have a choice. They have to be brought in."

"After we know who they should finger," Essex pointed out.

His thinking was sound but she worried about what other damage the person might be doing. No one was specifically seeking them out.

Christina didn't have access to Pahxin records. If someone was causing trouble, their own people needed to be involved to catch them. Or they'd have to hack into their systems, which would *not* go over well. Dulain hadn't been reading her reports. If he had, he would've visited them to complain. Christina would've welcomed the opportunity to requisition more agents. She already checked the pool and everyone stationed at Gamma Alpha was fully tapped out. No one could help because everything was a priority one project.

At some point, they'd have to invent a new classification to put them in some semblance of order true order.

"Let's set up the interviews." Christina rubbed her eyes. "We'll have to find a way to make it sound positive. Not like interrogations. I'm not against spooking them, but at the same time, we have to be careful. God knows what they'll be willing to do if they think they're about to be caught."

"I'll section them out," Essex said. "There are a few that know one another so we can get them to them relatively at the same time. The others are isolated from this list. Do you think we can get through them all today? I'm guessing they're all pretty busy. Their section leads will be pissed."

"Don't really care about their opinions," Christina replied. "I'll trump their authority easily enough. As far as how quickly we can get through them, we don't have a choice. If we don't pound through the entire list in short order, it'll leak we're asking questions. The person we're after will be warned."

"We might want to have lunch first then." Essex winked when Christina looked at him. She laughed despite the stress of the situation. "Just sayin'. If we're going to be that busy, I'm going to need some chow in me first. Don't want to slip up because I'm craving a damn sandwich."

"You're right. Go for it. I've got something here. I'll try to catch up with Dulain about all of this and prepare him for the shit storm of complaints he's about to receive." Christina rolled her eyes. "Not that he's reading his mail anyway. Chances are he'd just ignore those too. Must be a nice way to live … nice or insanely stressful."

Essex patted her on the shoulder on his way by. He'd become a lot more familiar since they spent hours in the same room together. She would've preferred him to keep his hands to himself but wasn't going to make a stink about it. Not when they still had many more hours ahead of them.

Christina grabbed a sandwich from her bag and nibbled on it, staring at the photos of each of their suspects. The images started to blur together right along with the words. She hoped the interrogation turned something up. Of the twenty people they found, none of them booked an obvious trip to North Africa.

Whether they'd gone to the mountain base Christina identified and raided was another matter entirely. There was no way to know unless they would've booked a flight. She didn't see any reason for the traitor to visit the place. It was a way station, a place to store supplies and prep ops, not necessarily to stay long term.

The door opened. Christina didn't look up. "That was fast. Was there no line at the cafeteria?"

"Not sure what you're talking about," Dulain said. "Is that where your partner in crime is right now?"

"Yeah, he decided we should eat before interrogating a bunch of people." Christina turned to him. "You've been a hard person to get a hold of."

"You know how it goes. We have four Orbs here now. Security just tightened. Another seventy marines are stationed here now. Half of them have power armor. It's pretty incredible. Military services pulled them together fast. I'm impressed." Dulain shrugged. "In any event, they're working through the process of connecting them."

"So everyone's chomping at the bit to see what happens," Christina said. "And whether or not we can go hit the Tol'An."

Dulain nodded. "We've practically got the Pahxin on speed dial for the moment we know where to hit. They're committing quite the fleet to the endeavor. Admiral Reach privately told me he's leery about sending the Gnosis but feels like he has to. If we're not represented … I'm with him on both sentiments."

"They're capable enough," Christina replied. "Besides, there's no way

those terrorist bastards are going to stand up to a full-scale assault and we both know that. It'll be a sweep and clear."
"Maybe. But I can't quite get a bad feeling out of my gut." Dulain shrugged. "They seem like the type to do something crazy. Like, blow up one of the Orbs to stop us." He held up his hand as if to stave off an argument. "Seriously speaking, why wouldn't they? If they were about to be utterly destroyed, removed from the galaxy, what's to stop them?"
"The knowhow," Christina said. "Just get in there before they can initiate anything like that. Here's the thing, they haven't prepped it to blow on their own planet. That would be insane. They'd have to go through the whole process." She paused. "Maybe that's a point to consider. Get people down there and take those before it goes south."
"Ah, as in raid the planet as quickly as possible while ships engage above orbit." Dulain nodded. "I like it. That's a great point. Well done."
Christina shrugged. "At least I've got one good idea. This investigation is mired in too much data. And I have no idea when or if these pricks are going to try to hit us again. All I can say is a bona fide maybe. Did they blow their wad on the Gamma Alpha assault? No. That's certain because we saw their forces in the mountain."
"Okay, so they're definitely still out there. Do you want the military to hit them at that base?"
"I'm afraid they'll have already left." Christina sighed. "Why wouldn't they? We escaped. They don't know who we work for so if they have any intelligence at all, they're assuming we're with some government agency. If they stay, they're digging in for an assault, preparing themselves for a fight. Which means our guys would have a real hard time."
"Don't underestimate them," Dulain warned. "You didn't see any power armor in there and your shuttle got away. I'd be willing to bet the military could take them with minimal casualties. Get them in position regardless. It'll make it easier to strike a different part of the region if you have to."
"I guess I'll turn them loose before we start these interrogations."

Christina narrowed her eyes. “Do you think they can be quiet about sending people out of here?”
“Maybe but they’ll gnash their teeth about lowering security.” Dulain shrugged. “I’ll help with that. Give me the coordinates you want them to hit and I’ll drop the hint to Reach. You can stay focused and before you say it, don’t worry. I’ll be sure they do it as quietly as possible. Just find this person you’re looking for. What did you call them again?”
“Red Corsair.”
“Yeah, them.” Dulain turned. “I’ll let you get back to it. Keep me informed. Even if I’m not reading the emails, I can still have them at hand for the rare moments of downtime I get.”
Christina watched him go, wondering what his job would be like in the future. The intergalactic arena would be different in hundreds of ways. Was Dulain too old school to keep up with it? He was a master of the single planet situation but could he expand himself to include multiple worlds across the universe?
If Christina had to bet, he would be promoted to an admin position. She went through the AIA roster in her head. Part of her worried they might ask her to do it. Of all the operatives, she held the most field experience *and* knew all the big players in the political scene. Her time with Admiral Reach alone made her a prime candidate.
God, I hope they aren’t thinking that way. Christina liked working for the AIA, but she had no desire to be the director. After watching Dulain play people for so many years, it stopped appealing to her after about six months. *They always pick the person that doesn’t want the job. That’s the point.*
Of course, if she failed to reveal Red Corsair, she wouldn’t have to worry about a promotion. Christina didn’t want to be dramatic but there was a possibility that this person could mean ending much of Earth as they knew it. Even taking down Gamma Alpha in a permanent way would be enough to disrupt defense measures.
The door opened. Essex came in and flopped in the seat beside her. “Alright, I’m ready to start dragging them in. I’ve got the authorization forms all filled out for their supervisors and we

shouldn't run into *too* much trouble." He turned to his tablet. "I even identified the leads with the greatest chance to give us a hard time."
"Good work." Christina sighed. "Dulain visited while you were gone. He's sending the military out there to attack that base. So at least we don't have to worry about that. However, this means we need to be extra diligent as we go about our tasks. Once we get our first ten sequestered, we'll go at them … then isolate them while we grab the other ten."
"Okay. Sounds like a plan." Essex smiled. "This is so much better than the analyst work I was doing before."
"I thought you'd like going out to the base," Christina replied. "I had no idea you'd this excited about the rest of what we do. Especially what we've been up to for the last few days."
"What can I say?" Essex opened the door for her. "Hanging out with a beautiful lady, looking over files that could mean the end of the world as we know it if we screw up … what's not to love? Seriously."
"Okay, now you're overdoing it." Christina shook her head. "Let's just go."

***

Cassie rested her head on Vincent's chest, pressing herself against him. After lunch, they slipped away to her quarters, making love for the first time. Part of her regretted their need for haste, the fact they needed to keep track of time but that didn't stop her from reveling in their union, the relief of so much tension.
While he dozed, she listened to his heartbeat, closing her eyes to enjoy the subtle rhythm. *This isn't part of the plan*, Cassie mused to herself as she cuddled against his warmth. *Join the Gnosis, make a name for myself, get a better assignment. That's what I wanted. That's what this was supposed to represent.*
But Vincent worked out. She'd been with men before. Always the guy who was great for that *moment*. She always saw the end of the relationship whether it be on the horizon or around the corner. Career, personality … something always got in the way of keeping

things going long term.
Vincent was the first man she couldn't predict an end to their union. Part of that came from the things they experienced together. They'd seen a lot, been through even more. Few people on Earth would ever understand. Aside from their compatibility, they also enjoyed a commonality that felt safe.
That bit was especially fortunate.
Cassie's tablet pinged three times. She thought about ignoring it when she remembered why it had gone off: she had a meeting with her sister in less than ten minutes. "Crap!" She cried, sitting bolt upright.
Vincent stirred beside her, resting his hand on her back. "I have to go! Like … right now!"
"What's wrong?" Vincent asked. "I thought you were done with meetings for the day."
"I forgot about my sister! She's here at Gamma Alpha for some reason." Cassie slipped out of bed, paused … then turned back to him. Leaning down, she kissed him, gently at first then with more insistence. When it seemed like they might escalate things, she drew back. "Oops! I gotta go! I have to take the world's fastest shower and bolt!"
"How long has it been since you've seen her?"
"A while." Cassie rushed into the bathroom and cranked on the water. "At least a year! We exchange emails sometimes. That's about it. What about your family?"
"They live in Oregon," Vincent called back. "Both parents, my younger sister, two aunts and my grandmother."
"Big family."
"Not particularly. What about you?"
"Tammy and I are the only ones left." Cassie got in the water, wincing at the chill. It warmed as she scrubbed. "Our parents died just before I joined the AIA. We don't really have any extended family. Our grandparents were gone before we were born. I guess anyone more than a sibling seems big to me now."
Vincent stepped into the room. "I get that. How long do you think you'll be?"

“God knows what she wants.” Cassie got out of the shower and toweled off. “If it’s money, that won’t take long. I haven’t been able to spend what I make but I doubt she’d come all the way out here for that. Go through the security rigors just to ask me for something? No … something’s going on.”
“Well, I hope it’s no big deal. Do you want me to come along?”
“Nah.” Cassie kissed his cheek as she passed him. “Hang out here. Relax. You’re just as busy as I am. I’ll come back afterward. Harper and Thayne can’t possibly get the Orbs talking before tomorrow. I’m sure we’ve got some more time. Well … maybe. When’s your leave over?”
“Didn’t set a time. Lots of folks are down here. I’ll probably be our representative for any small things that come up. Captain will have to come down to deal with planning the attack. Depending on if we’re going to be allowed to go along or not. Though I doubt Reach will let us hang back while the Pahxin take care of business.”
“Seems unfair.” Cassie dressed casually in jeans and a tee shirt. “The Tol’An have plagued the Pahxin for a long time. It should be their problem to deal with. We only recently got dragged into this. But the AIA agrees with Reach. They want us to stick with it to the end, show the Pahxin our will before we have to start negotiating.”
“Think it’ll be hard?”
Cassie shrugged. “Peacetime changes things. They’ll have no reason to be particularly generous at the negotiation table. We’ve got some decent advocates. We’ll just have to see if they’ll be enough to make things okay for us.” She smiled. “At least they know some of us are smart enough to figure out the Orbs. That’ll go a long way.”
“And we saved their ambassador,” Vincent pointed out. “Don’t forget that.”
“Yeah, we’ve got some victories under our belt.” Cassie’s tablet buzzed again, indicating she was late. “Shit, I have to run. I’ll see you soon!” She dashed out the door and ran toward the cafeteria, excusing herself as she bolted past various personnel. A couple had some choice words about running in the hall.
Tammy had always been a bit of a hellion when they were growing

up, a challenging girl who pushed their parents hard. After they died, she really went wild and Cassie couldn't do anything to help her. The AIA training program was too intense to take time off to help her through the grief so she got in trouble.

After spending a couple days in jail, she decided to get her act together, really focusing on her studies. She went for physics. The girl was smart, just out of control. Cassie thought she still had time left before she graduated. The educational program she found herself in had been intense enough to keep her constantly busy.

Cassie arrived at the cafeteria a good five minutes late to their scheduled time. Tammy sat in the back. They shared the same dark brown hair and blue eyes but that's where the similarities stopped. Where Cassie was lean from years of physical work in the AIA, Tammy was softer around the edges, not quite pudgy but definitely on the plus size.

Hurrying over, Cassie sat down with a quick sigh. "Sorry I'm late." She looked her sister over, noting she'd dressed up for the occasion in a gray skirt suit. She felt terribly underdressed suddenly. "It's pretty crazy around here so I've been really busy. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Hi," Tammy said. "We could start with that."

Cassie smiled. "Sorry. Hi. I've been to so many meetings, we rarely even begin with greetings. But you came a long way and went through a lot to see me. I doubt you're here for pleasantries."

"I thought I should tell you in person," Tammy replied. "I'm selling the house."

Cassie sat up straighter. "Why? I thought we talked about it. One of us was going to live in it someday."

"It's not going to be you." Tammy shrugged. "And I don't want to live in that town. We can split the money but I've already got a buyer."

"Wow. You didn't even talk to me before you started the process?"

"I needed to make some things happen and you weren't even on the *planet*, Cas." Tammy shook her head. "You don't answer my emails, you don't contact me. What should I have done?"

"Waited," Cassie replied. "Until you could talk to me."

“Well, I didn’t.” Tammy shrugged.
“Is that why you came here?”
“Partially.” Tammy looked down at the table, fiddling with a ring on her finger. “I’m … engaged.”
“Wait, what? You’re getting married?”
Tammy nodded.
“Don’t you have some more school?”
“I do … but I’m almost done with my graduate program then I’m hitting the books right away for my doctorate.” Tammy met her eyes. “He’s a good guy. Another physicist. We met in a study group and hit it off.”
“Congratulations … I mean, I’m still kind of pissed about the house but at least that’s good news. I don’t want half the money. I just wanted to know I could go home again someday. It’s going to be weird not having it around.”
“You can never go home again,” Tammy said. “I promise you it’s true. I tried. I went there and spent a weekend. The place was full of ghosts. Mom and dad … us … I don’t know. I didn’t feel comfortable, not for ten minutes. When I left, I vowed never to go back. Even the town feels weird.”
“That sucks.” Cassie looked away. “Still, I would’ve liked to try myself. Are you sure you can’t stop the sale?”
“I need the money anyway.” Tammy scowled. “We can’t hold on to things strictly for sentimentality. That doesn’t even make sense. We have to move on. That’s what you did when you got this job. I’m doing the same thing.”
“That sounds pretty final.” Cassie leaned forward. She reached for her sister’s hand but Tammy recoiled. “What is it you’re telling me?”
“When I sell the house and you get your cut of the money, we’re done.”
“Done?” Cassie lifted her brows. “What does that even mean? Why would you say that? What the hell did I do to you?”
“You remind me of mom.” Tammy glared at her. “And honestly, I can’t handle it. Besides, you’ve done everything you can to make yourself a stranger anyway. It’s not a hardship for me to walk away

from this. I'm ready to start a new life and that means letting go of the old one."
"It was that bad, huh?" Cassie clenched her fist to avoid yelling. "That traumatizing? How long have you been thinking about this? Since you went and spent a shitty weekend at our house? Or was it when you knew I'd be pissed off that you're selling the house from under me? Let me tell you, Tammy your timing could *not* be worse."
"When would be better?"
"Literally, any other time." Cassie rested her head in her hand, closing her eyes. "You have no idea what I've been through. What I've seen or done."
"And I'm sure you can't even tell me."
"Actually, I could." Cassie looked her in the eyes. "I could tell you all kinds of things but you're here to cut me out of your life. To end our relationship for … God knows why. This … get on with your life thing is kind of bullshit. I'm not sure why you think I deserve that but if this is the decision you've come to, I'm not going to fight it. I'm busy."
"Then … I guess … this is over."
Cassie shrugged. "I guess so." She stood. "You might want to see about getting out of here as soon as possible though you'll probably be in line. You didn't have to come here in person to tell me off. It would've been just as kind by email. Or not at all. If the money would've turned up in my account, it would've been just as cold blooded."
"They'll need your signature." Tammy looked away, finally showing some sign of shame.
"Ah. Of course. Now you need me." Cassie shook her head. "Email. I don't want to do … whatever this was … again. Later." She left the room. Anger made it hard to think. Part of her wondered why she didn't cry but she'd been through too much to give in to something like that. No, she figured she'd have a drink, relax with Vincent and fight through it.
One way or another, Tammy wasn't going to ruin her time off. Even if she had to get drunk to drown out the nonsense she'd just been subjected to. Her family life already barely existed. Witnessing it die felt like an appropriate companion to the end of the Tol'An.

Everything had to end sometime. She just didn't think she'd lose her sister so soon.

***

Ezria sat in his chambers, looking over holographic star map of the galaxy. He had people scouring the galaxy for Gizan, looking to capture or kill him as they could. So far, many had disappeared. His people suggested they might've died or been captured by the authorities. Either situation disturbed him.

They were supposed to be solid soldiers, the type that Gizan himself would've been proud of. If the man was dispatching multiple followers at a time, then he was a bigger problem than Ezria anticipated. It would make sense given the fact he was a formidable killer, the type of man who never failed until he did.

I wonder if I may have been too hasty to punish him. Ezria entertained the thought a few times. *If I hadn't, then what would the others have thought? That favorites were allowed? No, locking him up was the right thing to do even if he didn't think so. He gave me no choice … then immediately failed me again on his second chance*.

The fact that his best man made two mistakes gave him some pause. Were the humans so dangerous? Or was it the fact that the Pahxin were finally leveraging real military assets to fight them? He didn't know but either way, it frustrated him to no end. That led to a thought, one which felt like he should've had much sooner.

I know where Earth is. Ezria tapped the console to bring the planet upon the star chart. *If I assemble the fleet, if I send them now, then we can finish this once and for all.* His spies confirmed the Trindisha's never made it back to Pahxin space. They must've been kept on Earth. Likely as a means of throwing off the scent of their location.

They had managed to steal the others right out from under rightful Tol'An holdings. That was about to end. When they collected them all, when all six were in their possession, Ezria would finally see true ascension. His organization would rule the galaxy, bringing the order Calatha long saw for them.

But he needed to acquire them and that meant sending in a powerful force, one with enough strength to crush the opposition or at least hit their pathetic base swiftly enough to leave with the Trindishas. That meant calling upon his agent, the traitor who already failed once. It was not ideal, but the man needed to prove himself.

Ezria wanted to punish him for his earlier failure but the Gizan situation had taught him something. The man had to be sweating if the Tol'An agent gave him any indication of the price for failure. It would make him more effective in getting his militia to step in when his people arrived. Their combined efforts would easily take the human base.

He put out the word for his men to assemble and prepare for the attack. It would take several hours to arrive. The surprise attack would be swift and merciless and pave the wave for a universe of peace … under his careful guidance. Such was the fate of the stars and society as a whole.

***

Desmond was awoken by an urgent message from the surface, Admiral Reach pinging his personal line. He rolled out of bed, tapping the console to bring it online. Leaning forward, he squinted into the camera, blinking several times as he tried to chase away the sleep fogging up his brain.

"Bradford," he muttered. "Hello?"

"Good morning," Reach said. "Glad to see you got some rest. Harper says we're ready to try this thing out. I want you there. Can you be down in two hours?"

Desmond considered the timing. If he contacted the hangar right away, it was possible, providing he got priority clearance. Which didn't seem to be a problem considering who was making the request. He rubbed his eyes and nodded. "I'll throw myself together and be down as soon as possible."

"Sounds great." Reach smiled. "This is it, Desmond! I can feel it! I'll have a war council standing by. Your friends from the Stalwart will be

there too! What're you waiting for, man? Get your ass moving! Reach out!"

Desmond rubbed his face, taking a moment to recover from the unbridled enthusiasm of his boss. He'd never seen the man so ecstatic before. They'd fought together, seen wars come and go but he'd never been quite so exuberant. Of course, this was more than just finishing up a border dispute or settling unrest in a small region.

This was all of outer space. A conflict that began on the eve of humanity's first foray into the frontiers of their own solar system. They entered a war they didn't want, a conflict none of them imagined and they were about to come out on top. With the kind help of some new allies and a whole lot of luck.

Desmond let the hangar know to prep a shuttle for immediate launch. He then went about cleaning up and packing a few things for the trip. He figured he'd be on the surface for at least a couple of days. The final step involved leaving Zach Caplan in command of the ship. Everything else was in order and the current tasks were all underway.

The shuttle ride happened faster than he anticipated. Reach gave clearance the moment he had them prep for launch. Engines idled when he boarded and within five minutes, they were on their way to the surface, barreling down at the maximum safe velocity. He didn't notice so much in orbit but when they hit atmo, he grabbed the safety bar.

I hope Reach isn't working himself up for nothing. Desmond worried it might take Harper and her crew longer to establish a connection to the desired devices. If that was the case, then there'd be a lot of important people standing around for nothing. Who else did the man invite? The guys above the admiral tended to be impatient men.

Desmond glanced at his tablet. A priority coded message popped up, letting him know that marines were dispatched to attack a potential terrorist threat in the mountains. That didn't surprise him. The AIA had been working on finding the people responsible for the Gamma Alpha attack. If they found a target, however unlikely, the military would want a crack at them.

They didn't send him troop number but let him know that people from

Gamma Alpha and several military bases were conducting a joint action to attack the enemy fortification. Admiral Reach and Dulain were behind the choice to send them out, another part that didn't surprise Desmond. They'd been working together quite a bit.

After the Admiral got over the fact he'd been spied on for the better part of two years by his aide. Desmond often wondered if Cassie was sent to report on him if her sole purpose on the ship was really to keep tabs on the Gnosis. If so, they picked a new tactic by hiding their agent in plain sight.

I can't believe it, Desmond thought. *Cassie's been straightforward every time she needs to be. I'm sure she reports on our actions but there's nothing special to talk about that doesn't end up in official reports. Unless she's trying to judge us based on our competency, I have to believe she's on the level.*

The shuttle touched down and though Desmond had distracted himself throughout the trip, he still felt grateful it ended safely. Disembarking, he found Admiral Reach waiting for him nearby. The man waved, rushing forward to shake his hand. Idling engines made conversation impossible so they hurried off toward the main entrance.

"Sir," Desmond waited until they were inside to speak. "I hope you've tempered your expectations. I hope we're going to be the only ones there in case it doesn't work."

"Yes, I'll have only a few senior Gamma Alpha staff. I started to worry they might explode early this morning."

That thought hadn't occurred to Desmond.

"Are you sure it's wise for you to be there?"

Reach waved his hand dismissively. "I'm not going to miss this moment. I'm confident in Harper, Thayne, and Gil. Not to mention the dozens of others who have been working on this technology since we first discovered it. We're in good hands, Desmond. I only hope they have some idea of how to get them all talking."

They arrived at the lab and stopped outside the door. "If you need anything, they've got a small kitchenette area inside now. Many of them have worked nonstop since you brought back the fourth Orb. They have water, tea, coffee … that kind of thing. Otherwise, I

thought we might just camp out and answer messages while we waited."

"Sounds good," Desmond replied as they stepped into the room. The moment the door opened, they were greeted to the sound of shouts from different technicians. Since they kept talking over one another, it was impossible to make out what they were trying to say and Harper didn't seem to be doing anything to calm them down.

This isn't going to be conducive to answering messages. Desmond looked around, catching sight of Cassie nearby. She was observing but seemed to be staying out of the way of the people rushing around the area. He excused himself from Reach and approached, tapping her on the shoulder.

"Hi Captain," Cassie said. She seemed subdued. "Welcome to a new type of chaos."

"Looks like it." Desmond made a show of looking around. The four Orbs were set in a semi-circle with two spots left open. That intrigued him. He didn't think they would be so optimistic as to believe they would have the opportunity to bring them back there. "How're things going? How long have you been here?"

"Just a few minutes," Cassie said. "Harper called to let me know things were good. I hopped down as soon as I could."

"Reach woke me up. What do you think will happen?"

Cassie shrugged. "The first step was to establish a link between the different Orbs. We've done that already. Now, they're going to use the power of all four to reach out to the others. I've got a few ideas of how to make that work. Unfortunately, our interface device isn't working yet or anyone could do it."

"Meaning we have to rely on you, Gil or Heat to pull this off?"

"Heat hasn't really practiced this at all," Cassie said. "So he probably wouldn't be a good choice. Gil and I understand the basic concepts. He kind of … got sucked into it." She turned to him. "Not that I'm looking forward to it, mind you. Connecting up to this thing scares the hell out of me every single time."

"I can't even imagine what it's like." Desmond examined her face, noting she wore a carefully neutral expression. "I admire the fact

you've weathered it so well though."
"I haven't exactly had a choice." Cassie turned to him. "It was either put your mind at risk with an alien technology or let humanity down. Patriotism aside, I've never felt like there's been much of a choice when it comes to this. Just between us, I thought expert on the technology meant my studies. Not active participant in experimentation."
"Do you know why it picked you on that trip back? Why you had the vision?"
"The exact circumstances, no." Cassie shook her head. "But predisposition made it possible. I probably triggered it by a passive thought, something I didn't even realize I'd done. You know, the million little things that pop through your head on a daily basis. One of them put me in touch with the thing … and set a course."
"Difficult part of that aside, it's pretty incredible."
"Yes. I can admit that much."
Harper shouted for everyone to be quiet. When they all shushed, Desmond had to admit he was impressed. He thought that chaos would've taken a few tries. The doctor had the voice of a drill instructor and all the presence of a field commander. She held her hands up to gather everyone's attention.
"As you know, we've brought these Orbs together to discover the location of the final two." Harper gestured to the four. "They are hooked up and I'm getting solid readings. Gil and Cassie are here to interface with the devices and get us a star map. For the record, we were unable to find the last two because they are actively masking their signatures."
Gil Vaedra stepped forward. He was a Pahxin, an expert on ancient civilizations throughout the galaxy. He'd been with Cassie during their interface attempt. "Two Trindishas were not sufficient to push through the masking. Nor were we able to force them to turn off their obfuscation. Three came closer but we weren't quite there.
"When I tried, I felt some of the security protocols breaking down. With the fourth, we have enough power to push through. Our enemies may have their devices on stealth mode, but we can now override

their efforts.” Gil gestured for Cassie. “Agent Alexander, would you be so kind as to join me?”

Cassie waved at Desmond, drawing a deep breath before approaching the center of the room. Two chairs had been set up for them. If it proved to be like the last couple of times they tried these things, both would be out of commission throughout the duration of the experiment. He was surprised Vincent hadn’t shown up.

Reach stepped up beside him, putting his hand on his shoulder. “Here we go. This is it!”

Desmond shared his excitement but harbored some trepidation of his own. Would interfacing with four Orbs be more trying on the mind? Gil seemed okay after working with three of them. Perhaps there was nothing really to worry about. Now that they’d unlocked the method, how bad could it possibly be?

It’s alien technology, Desmond thought. *God only knows how bad it could get … and what long term effects it has on Cassie, Gil or any of us standing in proximity. In our hour of need, no one stops to think about the risks so much as the rewards. I hope we can get over that soon. It would be nice to worry about safety first.*

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Chapter 3

Gizan sat staring into space as he waited for them to emerge from hyperspace. He figured it would take several hours. It was plenty of time for him to make peace with his decision, to prepare himself for what would likely be his death. The odds were stacked cleanly against him.

There are many soldiers there but when I arrive, I have only to kill one man to finish this whole situation. One individual will end this organization once and for all. Success means real freedom. Failure means death. Either is preferable to running for the rest of my life like some sort of frightened animal.

Rythi proved to be far more amenable than Gizan anticipated. The good captain looked forward to a big payday but he was also something of a Pahxin patriot, at least he acted like it when they discussed the coordinates. They'd be arriving on the fringe of the system, allowing them an opportunity to scope the opposition before sliding into the planet.

Gizan anticipated a great deal of trouble but Rythi made it clear he'd landed on many planets without permission. He claimed to have never been caught doing such infiltrations. The man didn't say it with any arrogance either. It seemed entirely possible. *Perhaps I inadvertently picked the perfect partner.*

Rythi fought in several wars before leaving the Pahxin behind. He got into some trouble, primarily for illegal trade. Nothing too bad. If he was able to bank on what Gizan had him doing, he could probably get back in the good graces of his fellows. Of course, that was if Ezria died and the Tol'An folded.

I believe it will happen but I cannot be absolutely certain. This is a mission of chance and recklessness, opportunity and danger.

"We'll be out in a moment," Rythi called out. "When we arrive, I'll need to find some space rocks, anything we can hide out in. I'll run cool until then. From there, we can use the interference from those objects to mask our scan signature. They *might* know someone's

looking but they'll have no idea from where."
"You've done this before?" Gizan asked.
"Yes, back in the military we did this kind of thing all the time. I acted as a scout, checking out enemy installations before sending in attack forces. It was dangerous but I learned a lot about not being seen. That's kind of the point, after all." Rythi chuckled. "Of course, my first few attempts weren't entirely successful."
"I suspect you've had to get into some brawls then."
"Back then, yeah. Lately, not so much. To be honest, you're frighteningly good. I normally have much better hearing than that. I haven't had someone sneak up on me in years. Kudos."
"That's what I'm good at." Gizan joined him in the cockpit. "We never discussed the exact terms of our arrangement. I know it's difficult to make promises given that I'm not sure what we'll find, but I can ensure you get all the supplies your ship can carry. There are weapons you might sell … rations. That sort of thing."
"I'm good with that," Rythi said. "I've got a Kalrawv buyer who picks up my guns whenever I happen on them. He's a good guy. Not entirely honest but who can be these days, huh?"
"I suppose that's a point," Gizan replied. He let out a sigh. "Do you ever long to be in a single place?"
"Nah, I couldn't imagine it. That's why I took to the fringe. I thought I might be playing it a bit too dangerous with the authorities. I can't imagine prison. To me, that's the worst thing that could happen to anyone, you know?" Rythi clicked his tongue. "No, for me, I've got to be free to roam the stars. That's my destiny."
"I'm glad to hear for your sake you have achieved it." Gizan leaned against the wall. The ship trembled slightly as they left hyperspace. *Welcome home*, he thought. *How I thought I'd never see this place again*.
"Okay, quick burst scan …" Rythi muttered. "Yep! I knew it. Always! There's some space junk only ten-thousand kilometers away." He flipped several switches. Lights turned out behind them and it started to get cold. "Once we get there, I can engage the systems again but for now … well … it gets chilly."
"I'm noticing." Gizan frowned, peering outside. They were in open

space, the planets of the system little more than pinpricks. “How long do you think it’ll take to get to the planet from here anyway?”
“Twelve hours at max speed,” Rythi said. “I’ll use some tricks to make that quicker. When we get close to the natural satellite, we’ll make our move and land. I can get you pretty close to the installation too. I’ve got a little diversion tech onboard. Rarely use it … but it’s designed for just this kind of action.”
“I see. Will we be able to listen to their communications?”
“Sure will. Even from out here.” Rythi got them moving with a couple quick thruster bursts. “Okay, we’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” He stood. “Be right back. I need to get the systems online back there. They’re manual so they don’t draw from the main power … just in case we have to run *really* cool.”
“This is fascinating,” Gizan said. “I never knew that a single man could run a ship so effectively.”
“You learn to,” Rythi yelled back. “What about you? Have you ever thought about settling down? Getting away from this life?”
“I have,” Gizan replied. “And upon doing so, I find myself in this situation.”
“Ah. The past won’t let go.”
“Indeed, it will not.”
“Sometimes, you have to smack the hell out of it to get your way.” Rythi chuckled again. “Though I don’t have to tell you that. You’ve probably seen it plenty of times.”
“Not as many as you’d think.” Gizan squinted out the window. “We seem to be rapidly approaching your rocks.”
“Nah, we’ve got at least another five thousand kilometers. They just look big, believe me.”
Regardless of the captain’s reassurance, Gizan didn’t feel confident. He began to get nervous when Rythi remained in the back for almost another minute. When he returned, he took his time sitting down, peering casually at the scanner. It took considerable will not to protest the man’s relaxed demeanor.
“And … a little retro rocket,” Rythi said, engaging the reverse thrusters. The ship began to slow. “There we are! Drifting right along

with them like garbage. Oh, but for the number of times I've ended up having to play *that* role." He sighed. "Okay, time to hit the scans and get you something to listen to."

Gizan rubbed his forehead, surprised at how much sweat built up despite the cool air. Heat kicked in a few moments later. A projection of their destination appeared on the cockpit window, showing a large fleet formation. They were clustered near one of the space stations with others falling in beside them.

"Wow," Rythi said. "That's a lot of ships." He hit a button. "Let's hear what's going on."

"Report in," a voice said. "We are departing in less than five hours. I need sound off from all vessels."

"No …" Gizan smiled. "They are going off to perform some mission or other. This … could not be more perfect."

"You're right about that," Rythi said. "We should have no problem landing there now!"

"Excellent." Gizan patted the man on the shoulder. "Pipe this to the back and plot your course. We should figure out how we can close in so we're in the perfect position when they're ready to depart. Good work, Captain. You're proving to be a far better bet than I ever would've anticipated."

"Glad to be of service," Rythi replied. "Sending the com feedback now.

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Cassie made eye contact with Gil, smiling as she approached. She sat first and he patted her shoulder, a simple gesture she desperately appreciated. The fact they had been through this more than once didn't make it any easier for her to stomach. There was still fear, still a sense that she might not make it out of there with her mind intact.

Harper moved between the two of them, carrying a wire from the main console. She plugged it into a box behind them. Cassie winced as the doctor applied cool gel to her temples before pressing two electrodes against her. They stuck tight, feeling tight and

uncomfortable in their position.
“Alright,” Harper said. “We’ve learned a great deal since we started trying to build the item that would allow us to interface with the Orbs directly. While we do not have the device, the one we do have will give you two ready access to information without the esoteric hope that you have a psychic connection.
“It essentially sends the same impulses into your brain as we registered during the experiment. You’ll likely go unconscious for the duration. We’re going to give you exactly fifteen minutes to find what we need. At that time, we’ll pull the plug and hopefully, you’ll have what we need.
“If for some reason you need more time, we’ll take a short break before we try again.” Harper patted Cassie on the shoulder. “Does anyone have a concern?”
Cassie wanted to raise her hand but she remained still. She couldn’t see anyone but the silence was telling. Only the occasional cough made it clear she wasn’t completely alone. Tension filled the room thick enough to stifle her and she had to take several deep breaths to remain calm.
“Thank you, everyone,” Harper said. “Here we go. Brace yourselves, Gil … Cassie. This *might* sting a little but … I can’t be a hundred percent sure about that. Just try to remain calm and don’t move too much. Everything’ll be fine.”
Easy for you to say, Cassie thought. *You’re just sitting over—*
A jolt of pain tore through Cassie’s body, making her go rigid. She arched her back, her jaw dropping in a silent scream. The pain vanished almost just as fast but she dared not open her eyes. No sound reached her, nothing but the gentle thrum of power surging through the room. It made her hair stand on end.
She swayed and a strong hand gripped her by the elbow. Cassie turned to see Gil holding her up. They were standing in the center of the room though totally alone. Only the Orbs remained, each one throbbing with white light. She peered around the room, noting it had some small differences.
Like the lack of a door.

“What happened?” Cassie asked. “Why’s it look like this?”
Gil hummed. “It’s a familiar space for us. The door’s missing, yes, but otherwise, it looks the same. Better than the white room we visited before, don’t you think?”
“No argument there.” Cassie stepped forward. “But what’re we supposed to do? When we were in the white room, we just talked to it and things happened. You think it’s the same way here?”
“I think we can access the information from the console this time.” Gil gestured to the terminal they traditionally used to perform data queries. “Which is a bit more comfortably familiar for us I believe. Although, it’s just a proxy for what we’re actually doing … an easier way to understand the motions.”
“Yeah, I get it. You want a crack at it? And was that painful to you?”
“Excruciating.” Gil shook his head as he walked over to the panel. “I’ll be having a word with Doctor Harper about her definition of what is painful.” He tapped the terminal screen. “Okay, let’s see if we can crack the security. You want to take the secondary station? I think we can work in tandem.”
Cassie approached her screen. It flickered to life, displaying an unfamiliar interface with a circle on the left and right and two at the top. A blank space between them glowed white. She tapped the circle on the left and it shimmered, displaying English text in the middle. It read *indicate the function you wish to utilize*.
“Are you getting this too?” Cassie asked.
“Yes,” Gil replied. “Seems that we can use one at a time or all together. If you tap each of them in turn, they’ll all glow. Then we can patch into security.”
Cassie smiled. “You make it sound like you’ve done this before.”
“More like thought about it a lot.” Gil turned to her. “But this is different than expected. It is interesting that the interface looks the same for both of us. That either means I’m becoming more in touch with humans or you’re leaning toward the Pahxin.” He nudged her with his elbow. “I’m not sure which I prefer.”
Cassie laughed. “Nice thought but you’ve been hanging around more humans than I have Pahxin.”

“But think about all the contact you’ve had with alien civilizations. Those were our predecessors. Anyway … I think I’m ready.” Gil leaned to look at my screen. “Tap those globes so they’re all shimmering.”
Cassie complied. The text in the center changed, stating *security function override in process.* “That looks like a good thing, huh?”
“Maybe we’ll have something go our way for once.” Gil shrugged. “It could happen.”
A red light flashed on the screen, several quick strobes. “You jinxed us, Gil.” Cassie tapped the screen and the word *warning* appeared. *Devices are in shadow mode. Please confirm authorization to attach to these devices*. “Um … I don’t see anything indicating that allows me to do that.”
“How about we just say it like before?” Gil cleared his throat. “I confirm authorization. Please connect to the devices.” Nothing happened. When Cassie looked at him, he shrugged. “It was worth a try.”
Cassie tapped the screen. It changed to one of her standard query apps, the ones she’d used to gather information from the Orb many times in the past. She typed at the keyboard, performing her typical login. The system paused, just as it always had in the past before popping up with a message showing her credentials were accepted.
“This is so weird.” Cassie went into the settings. A large red button appeared with the word *authorize* on it. She tapped it.
Secondary authorization required. Cassie turned to Gil. “Probably because we’re both here. You want to get on that terminal?”
“I’m not sure what it’s going to bring up.” Gil returned to his terminal, typing away. “Ah … it’s one of our old standards from my education days. Fascinating where it draws these from. It must delve into the deepest recesses of our minds for the thing we’re most comfortable with to use.”
“Too bad it didn’t do that when we did the experiment,” Cassie pointed out. “Hurry up. We’re short on time here.” A timer displayed on her terminal showing they had less than five minutes. “How the hell did we chew through ten minutes so fast? I swear to God we’ve been standing here for less than five.”

“We probably weren’t conscious for the first several.” Gil tapped quickly. “Alright, I’m authorizing now.”
Cassie’s screen changed, showing the four Orbs again. Two more appeared, this time on the bottom. They began to blink, slowly at first then with increasing speed. The words *establishing connection* appeared. “Do you think it’s going to give us a location or just allow us to access them?”
“Likely both,” Gil said, “but I am just guessing. However, interesting to note. What if we could blow one of them up?”
“You can’t be serious,” Cassie replied. “I can’t believe you even offered that option.”
Gil shrugged. “It would save the military a lot of time.”
“You of all people shouldn’t even be thinking about destroying a culturally significant item like that.” Cassie shook her head. “No, we don’t have any idea what would happen. These could be anywhere, including some populated area. We have no idea what their base looks like. It would be irresponsible to just destroy them arbitrarily.”
“I think the Pahxin would agree with the possibility of losses,” Gil replied. “They might consider it an equitable trade.”
“Even if the leader isn’t there?” Cassie asked. “I know you’re good with this whole archaeology thing but think about the military implications of destroying something without visual confirmation of the target. We could just prolong the conflict *and* destroy something without cause. No. We can’t do it. I won’t agree to it.”
“Alright.” Gil turned back to his screen. “It was just a thought we needed to entertain. After all, we’ve been looking for the Tol’An for a *very* long time. My government might be willing to do just about anything to eliminate them once and for all. Even destroying a planet.” He smirked. “But … this is coming from a man who was practically an outlaw when we met.”
“Yeah, remember that.” Cassie gave him a sidelong glance. “You can’t speak for them. Your perspective on their behavior is seriously skewed. Just … you know. Relax. We’ll let the military decide. If for some reason they bring up destroying one of the Orbs, I’ll push back but at least it’ll be a military idea instead of us making things up from

in here."
The lights stopped flashing and all the circles on her screen went solid white. A line traced between them. The connection established and the devices in the room lit up so brightly Cassie had to shield her eyes. Gil shouted in surprise then told her to look at something. She squinted but didn't see anything.
Then it became obvious. A star chart floated above the chairs they'd been sitting in before. As the lights around them died down, a single line appeared on the map. One started at Earth and the other terminated some distance off. Cassie had no idea where that might be or how far away it was.
"That sector …" Gil shook his head. "That's what you would call the middle of nowhere. I wonder if we've even charted it." He sighed. "We're going to have to do some research with an up to date star database. Hopefully, one of the Pahxin vessels orbiting the planet will have what we need."
"That far, huh?" Cassie tried to calculate the distance but it was difficult to tell with the chart. "How long would it take to get there?"
"Depends on our calculations," Gil said. "But it's far so they'll be complicated. I would say minimally … eight hours. Possibly fifteen. Modern technology might make a fool of me though. Hyperspace drives have come a long way since I messed with them. I'm sure Thayne will give us an accurate estimate when we get out of here."
"So you have the coordinates?" Cassie asked.
"I do." Gil pointed at her screen. "They're going to wake us up in less than forty seconds."
"Timing." Cassie chuckled. "They probably needed to give us twenty minutes."
"Lucky it only took fifteen … this interface though. It's so strange that this is what the Orbs chose. I wonder what it will be like when we have the device to talk to it." Gil looked at the Orbs nearby. "The mysteries we continue to unlock has been nothing short of shocking to me. I sincerely cannot get over all that we have yet to learn."
"Crap!" Cassie slapped her thigh. "Do you think they know we just found them?"

Before Gil could answer, Cassie gasped, sitting forward on her chair. A dozen people surrounded her, each hovering entirely too close. Questions started bombarding her, so many voices she couldn't differentiate them. She held up her hand to stave them off, to get a second to breathe but they wouldn't let up.

"Stop!" Cassie muttered. "Hold on!" She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, grinding them in for several moments to fend off a low ache. Someone touched her arm and she shook away. "Give me some space! Please!" But they still didn't back off. Someone became more insistent, shouting.

When she opened her eyes again, the room appeared to be silent. No one crowded her but Harper stood nearby. Cassie cleared her throat and stood. "Um … hello?" She touched the back of her neck when a sharp pain danced down her spine. "Ouch … that was … really strange. And entirely more intense than I anticipated."

"Are you okay?" Harper asked. "You kind of freaked out when we woke you up just now."

"Must've been …" Cassie shrugged. "I don't know. Some kind of post-traumatic stress from interfacing with the Orb I guess."

"Did you get the information?" Reach called out. "Whatever happened, did you at least manage that?"

Cassie nodded. "Yes, we have the coordinates for the other two Orbs." She looked around. The other chair was empty. "Where's Gil? He … said he memorized it."

"Ah." Harper cleared her throat. "He didn't wake up right away. We moved him to the medical bay. Do you remember the information?"

"I can bring it up on a star chart." Cassie approached one of the terminals, half expecting it to show the circles again. It remained normal. She brought up a navigation screen and drew the same line she saw before. "There it is. That's what we saw. We were able to override the security feature and locate both of them."

"Yes!" Reach clapped his hands together. "We started to get worried after a couple hours but you came through! Great work, Agent Alexander. Fantastic!"

"Wait, what?" Cassie raised her brows. "What do you mean a couple

hours? You were going to wake us up in fifteen minutes."
"Cassie …" Harper put her hand on her shoulder. "We did. You guys went back in several times. You don't remember?"
"I …" Cassie shook free. "I can't believe this. Are you serious? Is that … so wait, Gil and I have been under over and over?"
"You both insisted," Harper replied. "Gil didn't wake up about half an hour ago but you said you were good to go."
"This is crazy!" Cassie backed away, bumping into the chair. "There's no way! It was only fifteen minutes! There was a timer and everything! Hell, I was *talking* to Gil just before I woke up right now! We were debating … something important." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Something about … no … it was … security I think."
"We should get you to the medical bay," Harper said. "They need to look you over."
"No … I'm fine … I think. I'm good." Cassie shook her head. Was she actually standing amongst those people? Were they real? She didn't know but part of her doubted. After all, they'd all been yelling a few moments before and then they were silent. Was this another hallucination? "How do I know I'm really awake?"
"Oh boy." Harper turned away. Two technicians came forward.
"What are you doing?" Cassie looked between them. "Back off. I'm serious. I woke up and there was shouting then … nothing. And now you're telling me I've been going back in there over and over? This has to be a trick. This isn't normal. Where's Vincent? He would be here if this was real."
"I'll get him," Desmond spoke up. So at least the captain was present. That gave Cassie *some* hope. "Hang tight!"
"Why isn't he here now?" Cassie shuffled back from the technicians. "Where is he?"
"Only authorized personnel were in the room," Thayne spoke up this time. He came forward, his hand outstretched, palm up. "Please, Cassandra. I'll take you to the sick bay myself. We'll get Vincent to meet us on the way. You just need a moment to acclimate to being back up and about."
"But how do I know this isn't part of my mind playing tricks?"

“If it is,” Desmond said, “what will it hurt going to the medical bay?”
“No. I … I want my tablet.” Cassie looked around. “Where is it? I’ll contact Vincent myself.”
Desmond stepped forward. “Here you go.” He extended her tablet. “I’ll walk with you out of the room. You know you can trust me.” He stared into her eyes. “Right?”
Cassie looked at the others around her. Of all the people in the room, he did count as the one least likely to be playing games with her. If the situation happened to all be in her head, then he’d be a safe bet. After all, she’d imagine him the same way he was in real life: a decent, forthright person.
Not that she had much of a choice. If she didn’t trust someone soon, they’d probably lock her up. And if she happened to be in the real world, then God only knew how long they’d keep her that way. Better to err on the side of caution. At least then she’d be able to see what happened to Gil.
“Okay,” Cassie replied, taking the tablet from Desmond. “I’ll go with the captain.” As they left, a pall of tension seemed to lift. She didn’t think she made that part up but it was hard to say for sure. *God, I hope this comes out okay. I really don’t want to be in a padded cell during the final mission.*

***

Captain Jeffrey Kent sat near the hatch of their dropship, clinging to his rifle. High command picked him to lead the mission on the mountain base. They had a decent amount of information to go on, a fair layout of the area but the one thing they lacked was troop density. Specific numbers were not available.
Best guess from intel was less than two hundred with conventional weapons. They wouldn’t have any armor to speak of but they could be dug in deep. Their dropship would provide air support while they swept the base clean. They were to kill or capture all combat personnel in the area.
The basic sweep shouldn’t have been too terrible, especially with sixty

armored marines and fifty conventional backup troops standing by. What bothered Kent was the unknown factor. If these people were working with traitors, then they might have access to advanced technology, something they planned to use for another attack on Gamma Alpha.

When he brought up his concern, he was told that was why they were being sent to attack the facility. Better they fight on the enemy's home territory than their own. That seemed like common sense but it still didn't make him feel any better about finding out they had ray guns, or at least something capable of bringing down their air support.

Lieutenant Brady Dashwood sat beside him. They'd run countless missions together, mostly in Africa and Asia. When the power armor became available, the two of them were second in line to train with it. The others went with the Gnosis while the rest remained at Gamma Alpha, continuing to practice while essentially being on guard duty.

Dashwood established a private connection to Kent. "These are the same guys we fought back at the base, right?"

"Apparently. I hope it's all of them. I don't want to spend the next six months chasing them all over the globe."

"If they're working with traitors," Dashwood pointed out, "it could take to the stars, right?"

"Nah, I've heard a rumor that we're about to take down the bastards that started this shit. The Tol'An? I think that's what they're called. Apparently, those aliens we've been working with are planning to send a badass fleet out there to tear them up. Providing we find out where they're hiding out."

"Think the Gnosis will go?"

"Probably. We have to be represented."

"You sad we're not going?"

Kent shrugged. "I don't really care. I'm here to do my job wherever they need me. They want me to go out there and kill aliens on some other planet? Just gotta ask. Otherwise, we seem to find plenty of people on Earth to blast. Case and point, look what we're doing right now."

"Red was telling me there could be aliens at the base," Dashwood

said. “They might be there to support these bastards.”
“I don’t know where he gets his info but,” Kent held up his hand, “I am worried about weapons. They might have something more advanced than a couple automatic rifles and grenades. If that’s the case, this armor might not be the *I win* card we’re hoping for. But intel doesn’t have any evidence so … we go in assuming otherwise.”
“I’d rather pretend they’ve got great gear than be surprised.”
“Won’t matter either way. We’re dropping right on top of the base while our air cover bombards them. Even if they bring out some heavy ordnance, we’re going to wreck these guys. You saw how well they did back at Gamma Alpha. Once the element of surprise wore off, we drove them off pretty fast.”
The pilot turned on the red light, indicating they were drawing close to their target. “I have visual on the target. We’re moving into attack formation. Anti-aircraft weaponry is being discharged. Prepare yourselves for deployment. I repeat, prepare for deployment. All units need to jump in less than three minutes.”
Kent stood first, followed by Dashwood. They approached the hatch as the other eight men behind them rose as well. Each ship held ten soldiers, three airships full of armored marines. Their support moved south to a pass wide enough to make an approach viable. They were present only if things went incredibly bad, far worse than anticipated. *I’m not putting those men at risk if I don’t have to*. Kent made the vow to himself before they even boarded their ships. He complained to the major about even sending them along but the army insisted on having a presence in the field. Somehow, the mission became a prestige op, one that each branch wanted to send a representative for.
How about we worry more about finishing the mission than making people happy? Kent’s opinion was shared by his CO but regardless, it didn’t matter. High command made their ruling so they had to comply. *If they really wanted to be involved in something big, they should be vying for a spot on the Gnosis when they go take down the space terrorists.*
The ramp dropped and Kent glanced out, ensuring they were genuinely over the target. His altimeter showed they were three hundred feet over the target. He hopped out, engaging his thrusters to

control the descent. Other ships opened nearby, more marines spilling out until they dotted the sky, armored titans plunging toward the surface.

Anti-aircraft guns popped all around them, flak filling the air with black smoke. Kent knew it would be a matter of luck whether or not he was hit by the attacks but they weren't aiming at him anyway. The ships were hammering the peripheral defenses, pounding the walls and weapon emplacements.

Kent made out eight standing structures. It was built into the mountain so they would likely have to go inside to finish off their quarry. Intel stated there were other ways for vehicles to depart, a valley nearby with an opening to a small hangar. That would be covered by the third shuttle that veered off as soon as it dropped its men.

The altimeter showed he was less than a hundred feet above the ground. Kent engaged his thrusters, grunting as he rapidly slowed. The ground grew closer and he made out a number of men running around in the open courtyard. Some of them stopped, aiming up to shoot at the descending marines.

Kent returned fire, using his HUD in an effort to get close to his targets. Some of the other marines lobbed missiles down into the base, hammering the area with explosive ordnance. Enemy soldiers were launched into the air here and there, their bodies blasted into pieces from the attacks.

Ten feet above the ground, Kent hit his thrusters again, carrying himself toward a roof. He landed hard enough to make the building shake. He paced to the edge, letting his weapon lead the way. A group of enemies stood below him, firing in the opposite direction at some marines who hadn't made it to the ground yet.

Kent dropped one of his rockets on them, landing it directly in the center of their group. It exploded, tossing body parts in all directions. The conventional weapons proved to be true, at least for the rank and file defenders outside. Several bullets tapped his armor on the left, fired from a weapon that lacked the power to cause any real damage. He turned and shot back, driving the men away from the window they

fired from.
Other marines landed. Chaos reigned around him as his people devastated the enemy ranks. Some of them started running, fleeing back toward the main complex in the center of the base. *That's where they'll have their underground facility—the place they might be able to escape from*.
The shuttle pilots called out that the anti-aircraft emplacements were down. They were moving into an over watch state, leaving the mop up for the marines. The third shuttle already left, moving to find the hangar to catch any evading enemies. With some luck, the whole operation would be over in a few minutes.
But Kent didn't like it. He felt like they marched in far easier than even they anticipated. Something wasn't right but what it might've been, he couldn't say. Hopping off the roof, he joined four other marines as they hustled down a path toward the main building. The occasional bark of rifles greeted them but the sounds were few and far between.
As they approached the doors, they joined six other marines who stood to the sides. "Report," Kent said. "What's going on?"
"They've got some heavier weapons in there," Dashwood replied. "We arrived a moment ago and Albany took a rocket to the chest. We pulled him out for evac but that doesn't seem to be all they've got so we tossed some of our own explosives in. Grenades, rockets … but they're dug in pretty well."
"We have to break in." Kent risked a quick glance inside, snapping a photo with his helmet. He stepped back for cover and admired his shot. It was blurry but that didn't matter. He didn't see any people in the shot. The room was wide open with several metal crates positioned about the area. Scans indicated men stood behind them as cover.
"What the hell are those crates made of?" Kent asked. "Do you see them? They withstood a pretty heavy bombardment if you guys hit them that hard."
"Don't know," Dashwood said. "But they didn't move when we hit them. Might be rooted down somehow? Can't say. But if they're

hiding behind them, we're going to have to get creative."
As if to punctuate his point, an energy beam burst through the door, cutting into the wall opposite it. A black mark remained, recessed into the surface though the attack didn't quite go through. While the conventional rifles wouldn't get through the power armor, that thing certainly would. The question was whether it was a handheld device or an emplacement.
If it was the former, that meant some real trouble.
Kent got on the com back to HQ. "Be advised, we have advanced weaponry on the field. Repeat, the enemy has access to energy weapons. We are going to attempt to breach momentarily." He turned to Dashwood. "Now that they know what's going on, we have to find a way through. Thoughts?"
"Blow the building." Dashwood motioned with his head. "No reason to save the structure. We're not occupying this place."
"I like your lack of subtlety." Kent turned to the others. "Everyone get back. I'm calling in a strike." The marines hopped away with jump packs, withdrawing to a safe distance. Dashwood and Kent took position across the wall on the roof with line of sight on the front doors. "Shuttle two, I'm about to paint a target and I need you to hammer it."
"I'm on it. Wheeling around to make the run now."
Kent placed two target marks at the base of the structure. The blasts might not take it down completely but providing it gave another entry point, the job would be done. Another couple energy blasts burst from the door, searing the building they stood on. Something flashed beneath them.
That must've cut through the metal finally, Kent thought. *A couple blasts to get through a metal wall. Even if those are emplacements, they're pretty nasty. I wonder how they got them here.*
The shuttle swept down, blasting the target area in a quick pass. They must've dumped twenty concentrated energy beams before having to pull up and veer off. Several chunks of the wall were gone, massive holes exposing the interior. Part of the roof collapsed. Movement inside indicated at least some of the enemy survived.

“Okay, you got your holes,” Kent said. “Time to see what that bought us.”

The marines charged, bursting from their various points of cover, laying down suppressive fire into the building through the various new entry points afforded them. A couple of energy blasts fired randomly, one into the air and another too wide to catch anyone. The first of the marines reached the facility and didn’t slow down, bursting into the space.

Dashwood followed, keeping just ahead of Kent as they went about securing the space. Kent was about to issue an order when someone shouted “grenade! Take cover!” Fallen bits of debris and the metal crates provided reasonable protection. When the device went off, it shook the foundation of the building.

Kent saw a marine’s body thrown clear of the facility, pieces of his armor melted. Someone else screamed twice before going silent. He called for medics, but at least two men were already dead. A passageway led to a flight of stairs going down, shadows dancing on the ceiling as their opponents fled.

“Sound off,” Kent shouted. “How many of you are ready to get back in there?”

Even the wounded made it clear they were ready to go on the attack again but Kent couldn’t risk everyone. They had a lot of mopping up to do topside. “Dashwood, grab six men. It’s too close of quarters for more than eight of us. The rest of you sweep and clear this facility. I want the entire base eradicated in half an hour. You get me?”

His speaker distorted from the shouted *hoo-ah.*

As Kent approached the door, he skirted a scorch mark on the floor. Bits of the metal were cracked, leading away from the point where the grenade went off. Pieces of power armor sat amongst the debris, twisted and broken into chunks. He saw a bone sticking out of one of them but turned away, focusing on the door ahead.

He didn’t see any emplacements, no weapons on bipods left behind. He doubted the grenade took them out, meaning they still had to contend with the beam weapons when they went further into the facility. This meant ensuring they had some kind of backup in the

event things went south.
“Kent to marine units. When you have finished sweeping the base, converge on this structure again and await orders. If you don’t hear from us in twenty minutes, form another team and come looking. It probably means we’re screwed. Good luck and we’ll see you guys soon.”
“That dire, huh?” Dashwood asked. “You think we’re in that much trouble?”
“I don’t know how many people are down there,” Kent replied, “nor do I know what other weapons they have but after that grenade and those beams, I know we’re dealing with something we’ve never seen before. Maybe those men on the Gnosis have, but our targets have all been conventional fighters. Now … we get a chance to try the real thing.”
“We’re ready.” Dashwood nodded to him.
Kent started down the stairs. “Then follow me.”

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Chapter 4

Christina wrapped up her ninth interview. She felt confident she did not speak to Red Corsair. If they did, they were better actors than she would've given them credit for. She went at them from several angles, trying desperately to trip them up. Only one of them seemed even remotely concerned by the process and he started crying halfway through.

She thought for sure she found someone who was guilty but it turned out he just didn't handle pressure well. Why he'd traveled outside the base as he had didn't make sense but apparently his supervisor pushed him to do it. Christina double checked with his colleagues and proved his story true.

Chances were good the man wasn't cut out for military service of any kind but apparently, he was a brilliant engineer.

So much for that. Christina stepped out to meet up with Essex. *I hope to God he found something*. She leaned against the wall, flipping through messages on her tablet. A message from Dulain caught her attention. The subject was *found it*. She tapped on it, bringing the rest of the mail up on her screen.

Cassie and Gil succeeded. We have the location of the final two Orbs. Unfortunately, Agent Alexander had a rough time. It took longer than expected. She's been escorted to medical. If you have a chance, I'd recommend paying her a visit. It might help. Otherwise, we're going to start a war council soon to determine the best course of action for an attack.

"That's good news," Christina muttered. "At least that part of things is working out."

"Agent Dawson!" Essex shouted. He was running down the hall, shoving people out of the way. She smirked. "Agent Dawson! I found something! I found something!"

"Settle down," Christina said. "You're going to shove a major and end up in the brig. What's going on?"

"When I was interrogating my people, I picked up a signal from outside the system. It was directed at this base!" Essex gestured to his

tablet. “It wasn’t received by control or any of the standard communication terminals either. Whoever received it was in the dormitory wing. If we hurry, I think we’ll find Red Corsair!”
“Lead the way!” Christina gestured. “And hurry!”
They charged through the base, weaving through the hallway until they arrived in the dormitories. Regular personnel took up those quarters. Transients occupied the rooms nearer to the front entrance. These were well appointed apartments suitable for long term residents. Christina hadn’t visited the area before.
Essex peered at his tablet gesturing down the hall. “It’s over here. Three more doors.”
“Whose room is it?”
“I’m not sure,” Essex replied. They flanked the door. “Scans show the room is empty but the signal is definitely being broadcast in there.”
Christina drew her weapon and kicked the door open, pacing inside to clear the space. A neatly made bed occupied the center of the room opposite a monitor screen. The window across the way had the blinds drawn, a desk positioned directly under it. She pushed open the door to the right, opening to a bathroom and a closet beside that. Both were unoccupied.
“What the hell?” Christina frowned. “Where’s the tablet?”
“Drop the weapon,” Essex said.
“What?” Christina glanced back at him. He was aiming his pistol at her head. “Are you kidding me? There’s no way you’re Red Corsair. What are you doing?”
“You were right about the AIA,” Essex said. “I don’t want to be involved after all, not when I have a better offer on the table.”
“Better offer? What the hell are you on about? You’re a traitor. Where do you think you can go?”
“There’ve been some promises but you still haven’t dropped that gun.” Essex stepped closer to her. “Do it! Now!”
“Just hold on a second—” Essex interrupted her by lashing out, striking her with the butt of his pistol against her shoulder. She winced but didn’t go down, didn’t so much as move. Glaring into his face, she tossed the weapon on the bed. “You are making a huge

mistake. Whatever you think you're going to get out of this, you won't."
"We'll just see about what I get." Essex motioned. "Turn around. I have to make this clean."
"Amazing." Christina lifted her arms, holding them up by her head. "Was there even a signal?"
"Yes, it came through while I was interrogating one of the people and he made me an offer."
"One you couldn't refuse?"
"Won't matter to you." Right when he spoke, Christina spun in place, deflecting his weapon to the side. It went off, putting a hole in the bathroom door. She grabbed his wrist, controlling the gun while using her free hand to clock him in the jaw. He stumbled back, dragging her with him.
Essex bumped into the wall, struggling to free his gun hand. He plowed his knee into her side but she refused to let go. She slammed her forehead into his nose, feeling the bone give under the force. He dropped the gun and shoved her back, throwing a wild punch. The attack caught her on the cheek, spinning her around.
She fell toward the bed where she'd dropped her own gun. Bouncing on the cushion, she snatched the weapon just as Essex grabbed her by the jacket. He hoisted her backward, putting her in a headlock. Christina didn't want to kill him, not right away. He had information she needed but he wasn't giving her much of a choice.
Pressing the gun against his hip, she fired twice. The recoil made the weapon bounce into her, biting into her waist. Each blast made her ears ring, the scent of smoke burned the back of her throat. Something warm coated her side as Essex's grip loosened. He dropped to the ground.
Christina stumbled away, spinning to point the gun at his head before dropping into a crouch. He pressed his hands against his wound, staring up at her in shock.
"You shot me …"
"Shut the hell up." Christina slapped him across the face. "Tell me who got the signal. Right now!"

“I can’t …”
Christina shot him in the knee. Her ears hurt far worse with that one but she ignored the pain, ignored his scream. “You don’t have time to be crying about a little pain, Essex. Tell me who got the signal. I’ve got a lot of bullets left before I put one in your God damn face. Now talk!”
“I … it was …”
“I know it was one of your ten, you jack ass!” Christina pressed her gun against his other knee. “Answer me!”
“It was Major Albans!” Essex shouted. “We were talking … and his tablet went off. I looked down at it and the signal came from out of the system, okay? He received some orders!”
“What orders?” Christina pressed the gun harder against his knee. “Talk!”
“Okay! Just settle down! He was ordered to have someone attack Gamma Alpha!”
“When?”
“Now!” Essex closed his eyes tightly. “Apparently, the Tol’An have some kind of plan and they need some help with it, but I don’t know more than that! He brought me in, offered me a place with that militia.”
“And all you had to do was kill me, huh?” Christina shook her head. “How were you going to explain that?”
“That you were the traitor,” Essex replied. “After you were dead, I’d plant some evidence.”
“Dulain never would’ve believed that, you idiot! Jesus Christ, you flushed your life and career for that? I thought you were smart!”
Footsteps in the hallway caught her attention, the guards responding to the gunfire no doubt. “I should execute you right here for treason but I’m sure we can get some more out of you.”
Guards stepped in, aiming their weapons at her. “Stand down,” Christina said. “This man attacked me and betrayed us to the Tol’An. I need you to take him into custody, get him some medical attention and ensure someone’s with him at all times. Do you understand? You are *not* to let this man out of your sight.”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you need medical attention?”
Christina shook her head as she stood. Plunging her weapon back in its holster, she scowled at Essex. “I’m fine. I need someone to arrest Major Albans right away as well. In fact, while you’re dragging this sorry piece of shit to medical, lock the base down. No one gets in or out until further notice.”
An alarm went off overhead.
“What the hell is that?” Christina asked.
“I told you they wanted us to attack right away,” Essex said. “This is whatever they were planning.”
“Fabulous.” Christina flipped her com on, sending an urgent request to talk to Dulain. He answered immediately. “I’ve got so much bad news it’s insane. I’ve got someone heading over to arrest the traitor right now but I think Gamma Alpha’s under attack. Do we have any defensive forces here?”
“We do,” Dulain said. “And I think you’re right though the military hasn’t made it obvious yet. Get yourself to me here in Admiral Reach’s briefing room. We’ll figure out what we can do to help from here. Are you okay?”
Christina touched her cheek where Essex punched her and sighed. She started down the hall at a brisk pace. “Never better, Beaumont. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

***

Ulian Hataran arrived for the war council, stepping into the large briefing room in the Gamma Alpha base. He noted several other prominent officials from the Pahxin military along with human commanders as well. Each of them mingled as they waited for the formal meeting to begin.
The potential end of the Tol’An attracted quite the crowd. Most of the people standing around were the types that wanted glory, to claim a spot as a participant in the conclusion to a terrorist threat allowed to flourish for far too long. Ulian felt they misunderstood the true benefit of the action.

Acquiring the last of the Trindishas meant far more than destroying ships and ending the terrorist movement. Yes, they could finally be done with the constant harassment of those bastards but the future of the galaxy would be altered when they brought those devices together.

The fact they were on the verge of doing so should've been the thing people wanted a part of. But the benefits promised to be far more subtle, despite the fact no one knew exactly what would happen. Scholars from the homeworld were en route to be part of the process, to be there when the devices came together.

Ulian spoke with his own technical officers and they refused to speculate as to what sort of wonders they might uncover. The cynical ones amongst his crew suggested nothing new would happen. They thought secrets were gated, only to be discovered when a civilization reached a certain point of maturity.

That was possible though it seemed the devices misjudged several cultures since they died out due to technological advancements. Creativity could turn anything into a weapon, any breakthrough into suicide it seemed. Ulian hoped his own people and the humans learned that lesson well.

Of course, it all depended on who remained in charge of the research after the threat ended. Would the Pahxin demand to have the Trindishas moved back to their own facilities? One theory suggested they were only together one time, back when they were first created. The civilization that built them did so for other cultures.

That meant they should operate ideally when *not* in the same room. It allowed cultures across the galaxy to communicate with one another, create a common language, partner up and function in a way that would've been impossible otherwise. They helped the Pahxin and humans partner in a swift manner.

Captain Desmond Bradford entered the room wearing a worried expression. Ulian wondered what might've happened. As he started over to the man to check on him, a blaring noise sounded overhead. The lights began to flash. He turned his attention to Admiral Reach who scowled, turning to his aide.

“What’s going on?” Reach asked. “What’s happening?”
Beaumont Dulain, their head of intelligence, spoke up next. “We’re under attack.”
“More militants?” Reach slapped the table. “I thought the military had them locked down!”
“No, this is happening in orbit.” Dulain checked his tablet. “The report suggests Tol’An ships.”
Ulian headed for the door. “We need to get to our ships,” he said. “Fortunately, there are destroyers up there to keep them busy but flying through that mess will likely be a challenge.”
Desmond turned to Reach. “I’ll grab Vincent and head up there right away. Most of our marines are down here so they can help defend the base if it comes to that.”
“Damn it!” Reach sighed. “I’ll organize our defenses here. Fend them off, gentlemen! This could work to our advantage if they’ve committed too much of their force. We’ll crush them here and follow the stragglers back to their base for a coup de grace. Command will open a tactical com net for updates. Good luck.”
Ulian rushed out with Desmond close beside. “You looked worried when you entered the room. Did you have a bad feeling?”
“No, one of my crew is in the medical bay,” Desmond said. “She’s the one who pulled the information we needed to find the Tol’An base.”
“Ah, her and Doctor Vaedra. I heard he had a bit of a meltdown.”
“So did she. It took a lot longer than anticipated.” Desmond shook his head. “We don’t have time to worry about it now.” He looked at his tablet. “Ten ships … maybe more have appeared and immediately attacked your outer defensive ships. I hope your destroyers are up to the task until we can jump in the fight.”
“It depends on who’s come up against us,” Ulian said. “And whether we even make it back to our ships without our shuttles being destroyed. But I left my first officer in command and she’s ready for her own ship. If for some reason I don’t make it back, she’ll do fine without me.”
“My first officer is here.” Desmond gestured. “I have to grab him. We’ll talk when we’re on our respective bridges, huh?”

“Indeed. Good luck, Captain.” Ulian tapped his communicator. “Morala, report. What’s going on up there right now?”

“A large Tol’An battle fleet emerged from hyperspace nearby,” Morala replied. “We have launched fighters to intercept their attack force. Com channels were jammed up when we tried to reach you. I’m glad you got through. I’m assuming you’re on your way up here now? I can provide an escort?”

Ulian paused, listening to an announcement on the speakers overhead. “Ship captains, we have fighters standing by to fly with your shuttles. Please note that all departures are scheduled for the next five minutes. Make your way swiftly to the airfield. This is not a drill. All marines to the walls.”

“Sounds like I won’t need it,” Ulian said. “Get me an accurate count. How many of our ships made it for the war council?”

“There are nine destroyers and two other battleships present,” Morala said. “One of them is the *Fortitude*. Do you know Torqua very well?”

Ulian attended the academy with Torqua. They weren’t necessarily friends, but each developed a grudging respect for the other. Duty kept them apart for the most part but when they were thrust together, things didn’t go well. Neither man approved of the other’s methods very well.

Torqua proved to be one of the more headstrong, reckless commanders in the Pahxin fleet. That’s why Ulian pushed Morala hard away from that path. He didn’t want her to be like his former classmate. Especially when she was so much better at her job, had such keen instincts.

“Yes, I know him.” Ulian sighed. “Let me guess, he’s taken the Fortitude straight toward the enemy, charging headlong without waiting for backup or even orders, right?”

“That’s an affirmative,” Morala replied. “I’m curious why he wasn’t down there with you.”

“Because he likes to make a dramatic entrance.” Ulian hummed. “Or he knew something might happen. He’s a bit out of control, but he’s also clever. It stands to reason we would be attacked though I thought even the Tol’An knew better than to assault such a well-fortified area.”

“They could be desperate,” Morala pointed out. “After all, we’ve got four of the Trindishas. Maybe they’re worried we can find their base. Better to assault here than dig in and wait back at their home base.”
“Good points.” Ulian saw the exit up ahead. “I’m almost to the shuttle. Remain at the ready but do *not* engage any of the enemy capital ships until I arrive. See you soon.” He killed the connection and picked up the pace, charging across the tarmac to his waiting ship. The pilot was watching the ramp and as he boarded, it immediately closed.
“Welcome aboard, sir. I can get us up and to the ship in less than five minutes, sir.” He didn’t recognize the man at the controls. He must’ve been one of the pilots brought in by the Admiralty. “My name’s Eyros. We can launch on your command, sir.”
“Shouldn’t we wait for support?” Ulian asked.
“This ship has scout rated shields and automated turrets,” Eyros replied. “The Tol’An have yet to get their fighters in position as well. I’m certain we can make it without needing escorts. The Stalwart is also close by in a low orbit.”
“Alright then, I’ll trust your judgment.” Ulian strapped himself in. “Get us out of here.”
The engines roared as the pilot punched the throttle, pulling up. Ulian winced as the straps bit into his shoulders, pinching his skin through the uniform. They were practically climbing straight up, the vessel rattling as it fought gravity to climb. The sky outside faded from blue to gray then gradually changed to black.
Golden lights streaked in the distance, drop ships plunging toward the Earth. Ulian scowled, well aware that meant ground troops. They were throwing their people into the battle as quickly as possible without regard to the ground defenses that might blow their troop transports straight out of the sky.
I feel like I’m missing something. Ulian turned to his tablet, tapping into the tactical battle communication network. He found the Fortitude and established a link to their bridge. “Torqua? This is Ulian. Do you read me?”
“Not in the battle yet?” Torqua’s voice boomed in Ulian’s earpiece. “You always were quick to get to meetings. Lucky I stayed behind to

start facing this threat. We've already engaged one of the destroyers. Should make short work of him. How long before the Stalwart can contribute to this battle?"

Ulian clenched his fist before answering. "This isn't a competition. But that's not why I'm talking to you. Something else is going on. They wouldn't just throw people away. Have you detected a pattern to the attack? Some purpose beyond harassing us while we try to plan our own assault?"

"They are terrorists, Ulian. They don't have any sort of real plan. They're madmen and you know it. This shouldn't be any sort of surprise to you. When we take prisoners, and undoubtedly we will, we'll learn that they're little more than pawns thrown at us in a flailing effort to prevent their own demise."

"Torqua … you learned better than that." Ulian sighed. "Come on, man! Think! I just saw troop transports entering Earth's atmosphere. Why would they risk those men's lives without a plan?"

"Because they are led by fools. I heard that disgraced officer Trall Derkon joined them. If he planned this operation, we should make short work of it. Remember when we fought him in the games back at the academy? Nothing to be concerned about whatsoever." Torqua chuckled. "Anyway, I have to go. We're fighting here." The line went dead.

Ulian winced as the shuttle shook from a heavy blow. At first he thought they hit something but then he realized it must've been an energy blast. "What was that? What hit us?"

"A fighter," Eyros replied. The automatic turret started blasting away overhead. Every time it turned, the scrape of metal echoed in the cabin. "We're holding him off and we're nearly to the Stalwart."

"Damn it." Ulian brought Morala back on the com. "It seems I might need an escort after all. The Tol'An were far more expeditious with their attack force than anticipated."

"Yes, sir," Morala replied. "I haven't seen them use these tactics before. They're charging us, blowing through pickets and moving toward the planet. One of their destroyers was already taken out but they're not slowing down. What do you think they hope they can

accomplish?"
"If they're desperate, they might be trying to destroy the Trindishas. That would end things pretty fast for us." Ulian scowled out the window as a number of smaller ships streaked by them. "Better get someone here in a hurry. We'll be to you soon but I'd rather not limp into the hangar if at all possible."
"I've got three pilots on their way right now," Morala replied. "I'm also engaged with an enemy ship so we're going to have to perform some clever shield work to get you onboard. I'll have Viran coordinate with your ship so we can get this done with the least amount of exposure. Morala out."
Ulian shifted in his seat to look out the other window. Capital ships engaged off in the distance thousands of kilometers away. Weapons fire lit up the sky, winking in and out of existence as shields responded with brilliant lights. Streams of smoke from missiles came out in gray globes and objects entering the atmosphere turned red with heat.
Sparks blinked off to his left where fighters engaged one another, a wild melee of Pahxin ships meeting the Tol'An fighters. Human vessels moved in to assist, the smaller destroyer classes that were not FTL capable, but still packed a good punch. They were the ones that held off the Tol'An during the first assault before the Gnosis got involved.
"This is going to be rough," Eyros said. "Hang on tight, sir. I see our escorts on scan but there's a fight between us and them. It'll take some flying to get through this."
"Do you need my help with anything?"
"You might want to take manual control of the turret. A human touch definitely outweighs the computer every time."
I haven't done that in a while. Ulian popped off his safety belt, tapping the panel to bring the seat down from the ceiling. It fell into place and he mounted the gun, riding it back up into the roof of the shuttle. Lights flashed on around him as a screen flickered to life, providing him with a high definition video feed of the surrounding area.
Taking the controls, he moved to the left and right, acclimating to the feel of how it moved. The first full turn made him a little dizzy but he

shook it off, drawing a deep breath for the action to come. They were flying right through a brawl between allied pilots and the Tol'An invaders. Friend or foe engaged, red triangles representing applicable targets.

Ulian pulled the trigger, energy beams tearing through the dark of space. Beginner's luck made him nearly catch his first target but a quick climb saved them from a direct hit just above the rear thrusters. He tried to lead the next one, loosing a couple of quick bursts but each resulted in a clean miss.

The shuttle began to rock about, taking evasive maneuvers as stray attacks came deadly close to catching them on the sides. Ulian shot back but he ultimately only provided suppressive fire, keeping opponents away from assaulting their vessel. Then, he got lucky, blasting one of the Tol'An vessels directly in the nose.

Shields went bright then shattered. The nose buckled, twisting all the way to the cockpit. He saw the pilot get sucked out just before the ship exploded in a great orange globe, scattering debris in all directions.

Ulian smiled to himself though he couldn't take much pride in the act considering how poorly he'd done to that point. Three enemy ships closed on them. He fired, this time without any direction at all, just to keep them away. His blasts flew past them as they evaded. When they returned fire, his pilot responded but it was only a matter of time before they'd be hit.

"Can you shake them?" Ulian asked.

"I'm working on it, sir!" Eyros shouted back.

The shuttle started shaking as at least three blows caught them from behind. Ulian glared at the scanner, prepared to ask their escorts what exactly they were doing when two allied ships buzzed not even thirty feet above the shuttle. They laid into the pursuing vessels, scattering their formation and buying Ulian's pilot some breathing room.

"Stalwart, come in," Eyros spoke in a firm voice. "We're coming in. I need you to drop the shields before we get there. What's the timing?"

Ulian didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He continued shooting, pot shots at the enemies swarming around them. He had no idea the

Tol'An could field such a force, let alone bring it to bear in such a tactically sound manner. Torqua must've been wrong about Trall because the man pulled off a brilliant surprise attack.

Depending on how it went in the next thirty minutes, he might even pull off a victory if his troops he sent to the surface made it to their objective. Ulian still felt as if there were more to the plan than met the eye. Hammering the defenses of a planet worked with available reinforcements or an auxiliary attack force.

The Tol'An didn't have access to that sort of thing. So what were they relying on?

"Hang on tight!" Eyros yelled again, dragging Ulian out of his reverie. "I can't evade this incoming attack!"

The shuttle shook again, this time rattling so hard Ulian was convinced they'd been destroyed. He wondered how long it would take for the turret capsule to be compromised, sending him into deep space. His monitor screen flickered and his scanner showed they took a rocket to the thrusters.

Eyros guided the ship in on momentum alone, kicking in retro-thrusters just a second before they entered the Stalwart. The bottom of their craft scraped across the deck, nearly colliding with the wall on the opposite side. Ulian got jostled about, cracking his head against the side of the turret compartment.

He rubbed the bump, tapping the panel to free himself from the hatch.

"We made it," Eyros grunted. "We're … onboard …"

"You okay?" Ulian opened the door to the cockpit. Eyros clung to his stomach, his flight suit coated in blood. "Oh my … okay, you're going to be okay, son. Hold on!" He tapped his tablet. "I need a medic on this shuttle immediately! We have a wounded man here! I repeat, medics report to the hangar right now!"

He looked toward the rear of the ship, eyes widening when he noted the ramp was gone. The fact the turret capsule remained sealed was the only reason he survived. Landing the ship safely at all took incredible luck and a lot of skill. Ulian put his hand on Eyros's shoulder, squeezing it.

"I'm not leaving you until the medics get here," Ulian said. "Don't you

dare die on me. I don't want to have to give you an order on that. We don't have a lot of flyers like you and I refuse to lose the one who saved my life today, you understand?" He gave the man a chance to respond. When he didn't, Ulian raised his voice. "I said do you understand?"

"I … do …" Eyros grunted. He grit his teeth. "I'm not sure … I can … do this … sir …"

"You'd better!" Ulian got back on his com. "Where's my medic?"

"We're in the hangar now, sir!" A voice replied. "We're boarding the shuttle now!" Three people pounded into the vessel, rushing toward him. They were carrying a couple of medical kits and shooed him aside. "We've got this, sir. We'll get him to the medical bay right away. Are you injured?"

"Negative." Ulian backed away. "Don't you dare die on me, Eyros! I'll be checking on you personally and I expect to hear good things!"

"Yes, sir!" Eyros shouted. The medics went to work on him.

Ulian left the shuttle, reaching out to Morala. "I'm on board now and en route to the bridge. Get us moving toward the action. I want to be in position to start fighting the second we're there. Also, I want to get Captain Bradford on the line. The Gnosis might already be engaged, but we're going to provide some support for his shuttle on its way up."

"Yes, sir," Morala said. "That looked like a scary ride, sir."

"You have no idea," Ulian muttered. "Just get us underway. We've got a skirmish to win."

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Chapter 5

Throughout the trip to the medical bay, Cassie had to fight hard to keep her wits about her, staring at the floor to avoid freaking out. When they finally arrived, Vincent was waiting. She hurried over to him, throwing her arms about his neck. He gripped her tightly, keeping her close.

"I have to go to the briefing," Desmond said. "You can wait here with her. Make sure she and Gil are okay."

"I'm on it." Vincent escorted her to a bed where she sat down. "Hey, you're going to be okay. They said that Gil's just sleeping. It's not really a coma … just a very deep slumber."

Cassie nodded her head, still staring into space.

"Talk to me, hon. Are you in there?"

"Yes …" Cassie lifted her head, looking into his eyes. "I feel like … like I'm in a dream. You know how everything looks foggy and weird? I'm just … stuck … sort of … lost. I don't know how to describe it beyond that. I'm floating … kind of."

"Let me help you get comfortable." Vincent lowered her onto the bed and she stared up at the ceiling, resting her hands on her stomach. Time passed but she didn't know how much. She heard voices around her. Someone scanned her but she didn't move. Just remained staring in place.

An alarm caught her attention, a constant buzzing from somewhere in the hall. Red lights flashed nearby. Cassie knew what it meant. Someone was attacking the base. Again. The last time it happened was the militia Christina was investigating. Who would have the nerve to do it again?

Desmond burst into the room. "Vincent! We have to go. Tol'An just entered orbit. They've got a lot of ships up there."

"But …" Vincent sighed. "Cassie, I have to go. Will you be okay here?"

Cassie felt her faculties returning. Some of the mist started to lift from her mind. She nodded emphatically. "Yes. Go … I'll … I'll be fine. I'm … sorry I can't go with you. I should be there."

“You’ll be with us when we take the fight to them.” Vincent hurried after Desmond. “I promise! Just get well while we’re gone! We’ll see you soon!”

Cassie watched them go, turning her attention to Gil. The Pahxin archaeologist did look sound asleep. She thought they might have to do something to help him, something more than let him linger there but she didn’t know what. Especially with what was happening around them. Any sort of procedure would have to wait until the danger had been dealt with.

Wait. A thought dawned on her. *Tammy was here. I hope to hell she got out.* Cassie checked her tablet, trying to establish a connection with her sister’s terminal. It took several pings before she finally answered.

“Hello? Cassie?” The fear in her voice was like stabbing daggers. “What’s happening here?”

“Did you not get out of the base yet?” Cassie asked. “Are you still here?”

“Yes … I was in a waiting room near the tarmac. They were getting a passenger shuttle ready for a bunch of us but then the alarms went off and now we’re stuck here.”

“Damn it!” Cassie moved toward the door. One of the medics tried to stop her.

“Ma’am, you can’t leave! You’ve been checked in.”

“I’m busy,” Cassie replied. “I need to get to my sister.”

“But … you can’t!” He turned to one of the others. “Doctor, please! Can you help?”

Cassie spun on them. “Listen to me, all of you. Yes, that was a trying experience but I can’t just sit around here hoping I’ll get better over the next twenty or thirty minutes while we’re under attack. Now, you can either back the hell off or I can ensure you wished you did. Either way, I’m walking out this door and ensuring innocent lives are not lost in this conflict.”

“If she’s that feisty,” one of the other doctors spoke up, “let her go. We have people who can’t walk around on their own right now.”

“Thank you.” Cassie hurried out the door, jogging for the civilian waiting area. “Are you still on the line Tammy?”

“I am, but there are ships or something coming down from the sky, Cassie. I can see these weird streams of smoke. A whole bunch of them.”
“Okay, I want you to come back into the base. Head down the hall toward the cafeteria.”
“They’re not letting us leave!” Tammy shouted. “Wait! What’re you doing? I’m talking to my sister on that!” Her voice went distant. “Come on! That’s my tablet! Leave it alone! Hey! Don’t!” The line went dead a moment later.
Cassie pushed herself, moving to a full run. Explosions outside rumbled the ground, tiny tremors that indicated a distance of half a mile or so. She figured they were landing vehicles, crafts depositing troops from the invading force. Were they Tol’An? Pahxin? Someone new? Or just another bunch of human traitors?
Distant gunfire caught her attention, automatic rifles popping off maybe two hundred yards away. Cassie cursed the fact she didn’t have a weapon of her own but she figured one wouldn’t be hard to acquire from the guards when she arrived for the civilians. Why they hadn’t been moved to safety was beyond her.
Rounding the corner, she plowed into a heavy crowd taking up the hallway. The people seemed to be panicking, unsure exactly what to do with themselves. They were the civilian contractors, the technicians, and engineers without the military experience to maintain discipline in light of the attack.
Cassie shoved through them but had to pause finally, shouting to attract their attention. “Listen!” Most of them went silent, giving her some space. “You all need to move out of here in an orderly fashion! The enemy isn’t here yet. Get to the shelters near the center of Gamma Alpha and await further instructions but you *cannot* remain here!”
“Who the hell are you to tell us what to do?” A random voice called from the back.
“I’m Special Agent Cassandra Alexander of the AIA,” Cassie replied. “And I do not want to have to bring guards in here to escort you but I will. You’d be wasting valuable resources if you force my hand. So please, for your own safety and to ensure this passageway is clear for

official business, get moving!"
The people surged suddenly, practically carrying her with them as they headed off. Cassie fought her way through them, shoving hard until she broke free. Only a few stragglers remained but she ignored them, instead running for her destination again.
A voice crackled on the speaker overhead, one of the men from the control room. "Attention, all civilian personnel should report to the shelters immediately."
Cassie groaned. *You're a little late*. Another explosion sounded in the distance, this one far closer than the last. She checked her tablet, bringing up a scan program while on the run. Her head started aching, probably a side effect from being under with the Orb for so long. She fought through the pain, slowing down as she approached the corridor leading outside.
A soldier stepped in her way, his rifle held over his chest. "Whoa there, lady! Where do you think you're going?"
"I'm here for Tammy Alexander." Cassie tapped her tablet to bring up her ID and showed it to him. "I'm AIA. The rest of the people here can come with me too. I'll take them into the shelter."
"I have orders for the nonworking personnel to remain here," he replied. "I can't let you take them."
"Then we've got a problem," Cassie said, "because I'm not letting these people remain so close to where the action is likely to take place. Who's your CO? I'll call them right now but we don't really have time for this."
The guard looked at her then glanced over his shoulder. He frowned. "They were just trying to catch a shuttle out of here … it's pretty messed up to leave them here."
"I agree," Cassie replied. "But we're still wasting time."
He sighed, then stepped aside. "Go ahead."
Cassie burst through, pausing just inside the room. Tammy stood, an expression of terror etched on her face. "You made it!" She hurried over and hugged her sister. "I can't believe you made it!"
"Of course I did." Cassie patted her on the back once. "We have to go now." She turned to the others, four men dressed in business suits.

“All of you are going to want to come with me. I’ll get you to safety.”
“Deeper into the base?” One asked. “That doesn’t seem safer.”
“They’re going to be fighting right out there.” Cassie gestured to the door leading outside. “If you want to risk the fact they might get inside and have no compunctions about shooting you, that’s your business. I for one would rather you get your ass in gear and follow me so we can avoid that.”
They looked amongst one another before standing, falling in behind her. Cassie turned to the guard. “Where can I get a gun? I was in the middle of a meeting and couldn’t arm myself before I got here.”
“There’s an armory on the way.” The guard showed her the path to it on his tablet. “Do you know the area?”
“I do.” Cassie checked her scanner. Five vehicles landed in the immediate area and there were at least sixty troops moving on the base. Something was trying to jam her scanner though, interfering with good numbers. “You’d better get some reinforcements up here, soldier. I think they might get into the courtyard this time.”
“I will. Good luck!”
Cassie gestured for the others to follow her, leading them back down the hallway. They shouted questions at her but she shushed them with a wave of her hand. Shots outside became faster paced, rattling off in rapid succession. Fighters passed by overhead, low enough to make the walls rattle.
Those trailing behind Cassie started really panicking. Tammy grabbed her arm, pulling hard. “Are we going to die in here?”
“No,” Cassie spoke firmly. She stopped in front of the armory where two men stood guard with rifles. A third lingered nearby, trying to look busy but failing miserably. They could’ve locked the door and joined the fighting. “I’m Senior Agent Cassandra Alexander. I need a weapon.”
“Um … yes, ma’am.” The guard on the left answered her. He didn’t seem to care about whether she had the credentials or not. He just stepped aside.
Cassie approached the third wheel. “You, I need you to escort these people to the shelter right now.”

“Absolutely!” The man smiled like she’d just told him he won the lottery. He waved at the others to come with him. “Come on! I can get us there in no time. I have a shortcut that should keep us *away* from the conflict.”

Tammy tapped Cassie’s shoulder. “I don’t want to go with that idiot, I want to stay with you.”

“You can,” Cassie replied. “I’m going to grab a weapon and I’ll take you somewhere safe.” She watched the others rush off. The two guards stared longingly after them. “You two should probably lock this up after I get what I need and find a way to help. If your CO learns you sat here during the fight, I doubt you’ll be happy with the results.”

They exchanged a glance. The one on the right shrugged. “Better to be in trouble than dead.”

Cassie shook her head, entering the room. Most of the weapons had already been allocated but she grabbed a small submachine gun, some extra magazines, and a sidearm. Strapping the smaller weapon to her hip, looking around for anything else that might be of value. The grenade crates were empty and all the body armor was gone.

I guess this is it, Cassie thought. She stepped back into the hall, addressing the guards. “At least lock this door and leave the area. If someone gets this far, we’ll have bigger problems than a few stray pistols falling into enemy hands.”

She grabbed Tammy’s hand and dragged her off down the hall, taking a different turn than the guard leading the other civilians did. They were heading for operational control. Cassie figured if she was going to contribute to the fight, that would be the best way. The others had already returned to the Gnosis.

And flying around up there would be insane right now anyway. Cassie glanced at her scanner. A full-on brawl was taking place nearby. Anti-aircraft guns barked near the perimeter, rapid-fire shots competing with the alarm blaring overhead. *I’m pretty sure everyone knows we’re under attack. They could probably shut off the siren*.

“Where’re we going?” Tammy asked.

“We need to help,” Cassie said. “And we’ll be able to get something

done down in control. Unfortunately, it's pretty far away. We'll be moving for a bit. Just … stick close. I don't foresee any trouble. Not for us. But I don't know how thorough this attack is or who we're even fighting."

"Isn't there someone you can ask?"

"No reason right now," Cassie replied. "Everyone I know is busy anyway. We'll get our own answers. You have to trust me. Can you do that?"

Tammy nodded emphatically. "This is your world. I'm not about to argue with you about how to survive in it."

"Good." Cassie sighed. *At least that's one less thing to worry about. Now, to get us where we need to be with the least amount of trauma. That's the trick.* The scanner indicated they were approaching a side entrance. It may have been compromised given where the enemy ships landed. If so, a real fight could be going on near there … or enemy agents may have entered the base. Scans didn't show who they were facing so she didn't know what kind of opposition to expect. Either way, they didn't have a choice about their destination and who they fought didn't really matter if a brawl became inevitable. *We'll cross that gun battle when we get to it.*

***

General Trall stood on the bridge of his battleship, watching the operation unfold on the main screen. Eighty percent of the deployed soldiers made it to the surface of the planet. He wondered where their human allies were and why they hadn't joined the fray. Their own resources may not have been up to the rapid deployment task.

Still, the Tol'An attack seemed like it would be more than a match for the paltry defenses they were facing on the surface. Orbit was another matter entirely. The Pahxin committed a large number of vessels to the planet and they were delivering quite the pounding. Chances of them stopping the mission were slim to none.

After all, they couldn't guess at the purpose Ezria had in mind. Trall found it shocking but he obeyed. The grand scheme of things, the

vision of their future, was not his to know. He merely embraced the word of his master and enacted it. He refused to become like Gizan, an out of favor outlaw, hunted throughout the galaxy.

No, he would maintain his honor and fulfill his mission. Without their reinforcements, additional risk had been introduced into the situation but Trall tried to mitigate it by sending additional fighters to the surface to provide cover. He wondered why the military forces of the Pahxin converged on the base.

It didn't make a great deal of tactical sense other than to protect the Trindishas but wouldn't they have been better off moving them to a more secure location? Trall knew they were sentimental but allowing the humans to dictate defensive measures seemed foolhardy to say the least.

These pathetic creatures didn't know how to handle themselves in space. Their survival relied solely on luck, a concept which had finally run out for them. This attack, this assault, would not go down as the last one had. Trall did not underestimate their tenacity or their fortune. He brought an overwhelming number of troops to crush them once and for all.

And once they concluded their business there, they could turn their attention to the Pahxin homeworld. That would be the real prize in Trall's mind. The one that he had vested interested in. If anyone deserved to be destroyed for their impertinence, their arrogance and pride, it was those self-righteous military bastards.

You never should have drummed me out, Trall thought. *I'll make you all pay for that soon enough.*

***

Desmond and Vincent arrived at the landing field, pausing just inside the door to look out. An aerial battle took place roughly a mile to the south, ships flying in and out of each other in dramatic dogfights. Anti-aircraft guns fired at incoming vessels dropping from orbit, probably troop transports based on how large their vapor trails were. Marines shouted all around them, charging the walls. Those already in

position fired at the ground, blasting away at incoming ground troops. The carnage gave them both pause.
“We have to get up there,” Desmond said. “We’ve got escorts standing by but I think the two of us shouldn’t go together.”
“I agree,” Vincent replied. “At least one of us has to make it to the ship alive.” He paused. “And this must be the most morbid conversation we’ve ever had.”
“Yeah, I’m not loving it.” Desmond looked around. “Just getting to the shuttles might prove to be an adventure. There’s not even a guard at the door right now.”
“They’re all holding back the tide.” Vincent looked about. “I say we wait for the next ship to pass us overhead and make a run for it. I’ll take the ship on the right, you grab the one on the left. Sound good?”
Desmond shrugged. “As good as any other plan.” A moment later, the rumble of engines came toward them from the north. The whine of the thrusters didn’t sound like one of their vessels. The double A guns swiveled and started blasting away. An explosion made both men stumble back into the base.
When the chunks of ship impacted the ground, a secondary boom washed the area in a wash of heat intense enough to make breathing difficult. Desmond moved back to the door cautiously, sighing when he saw their shuttles had been obliterated. The fires rose up a good thirty feet in the air.
“We have a big problem.” Desmond waited for Vincent to see what he was talking about. “How’re we going to get up there now?”
“We can get to the fighters in the hangar,” Vincent suggested. “We’re both qualified still.”
“Yeah, qualified doesn’t necessarily mean combat competent.”
Desmond considered the idea for a moment. It might’ve been the only way to get into the fight and at least they’d be able to defend themselves. “Alright, so if we do this, we’re going to divert all power to our defenses and make like a bat out of hell straight for the Gnosis.”
“Understood.”
“And we’ll still try to find an escort.” Desmond scowled, glancing at the hangar. It was two hundred yards from their position, requiring

them to run over open ground. “That’s a bit of a trek. Stay close to the building and don’t stop. You got it? I have a bad feeling about going out there. It’s going to be crazy.”
“Nothing’s easy, sir.” Vincent patted Desmond. “I’ll take the lead. You ready?”
“As I’ll ever be, I guess.” The two of them dashed from their cover, running along the side of the building. After a dozen yards, they were sprinting as guns exploded all around them, explosions shaking the ground and walls. Desmond saw more ships coming in out of the corner of his eye, landing hard near the base.
This is a full-scale invasion. But what’s their objective? This doesn’t seem like they want to take the Orbs. Desmond’s eyes widened but he didn’t have time to voice his concerns. They had to keep moving, keep running the whole time. *They are here to destroy them. To blow them up. Better no one have them than us*.
Concrete exploded into the air barely five feet away, blasted by automatic fire. Desmond raised his hand, flinching away from the debris as it showered them and clapped against the wall. He picked up the pace, casting a glance to the left. A section of the wall had been taken down. Invaders came through, pressing toward the main complex.
“They’re through!” Desmond shouted. He tapped his com unit. “Bradford to control, do you copy? You’ve got a breach near the landing area! Repeat, incoming soldiers in the landing area. Respond!”
“We read you.” The voice was indistinct, the sounds barely registering as words before they were cut off.
Vincent hustled into the hangar with Desmond close behind. Shadows blanketed them, darkness as the roof blocked out the sun. Six fighters were lined up with a couple of technicians hunkered down behind some metal crates. They came out when the two officers entered, moving toward the door to provide some cover.
“Hey, Stanford!” Vincent clapped one of them on the shoulder, a burly man with a thick beard and grease stained blue jumpsuit. “Fancy meeting you here, huh?”
“You’re lucky to be alive after running across that field,” Stanford

said. “What brings you both here?”
One of the other technicians started shooting, firing a couple short bursts outside.
“We need to get to the Gnosis,” Vincent replied. “Mind if we grab a couple of these fighters?”
“Those two are ready,” Stanford pointed. “But they only have blasters. No missiles. If you’re going up there for some action, you’ll need to stick to guns.”
“Fair enough,” Vincent said. “Got some helmets in them?”
“Yeah, hopefully they fit.” Stanford led the way to the ships. “Climb aboard and I’ll get you moving. You probably won’t get much in the way of a taxi run but you shouldn’t need it. How long has it been since you’ve flown one of these things anyway?”
“A while.” Vincent grinned at Desmond. “Longer for him.”
“Yeah, yeah.” Desmond boarded his ship, grabbing the helmet from the seat. He pulled it on, tapping the code to get the reactor online. “You got me on com, Commander?”
“I hear you,” Vincent said. “We can’t leave without putting down some suppressive fire on the invaders though, don’t you think?”
“I thought about it.” Desmond checked the thrusters. They showed ready to go. “There are a lot of pilots up here. I don’t want to get in the way. We’ll tell them what’s going on and support from the ship. Follow my lead. You ready?”
“Ready.”
Desmond pressed the throttle forward, leading his ship out of the hangar. The marines engaged in a firefight just outside, tearing through the invading force. They were holding them back, but only barely. If reinforcements didn’t arrive for them, they’d be in some serious trouble.
“Bradford to Gnosis, do you read?”
“This is Zach. I’m holding position in orbit waiting for your command.”
“Vincent and I are on the way in fighters. I’m sure the marines are already poised for action but they need to get down here in a hurry. Have them report to the hangar immediately then send them in a

shuttle to reinforce Gamma Alpha. The invading force has pushed into the courtyard and will arrive in the building at any moment."
"Understood."
Desmond accelerated, pulling up as he moved outside. The bottom thrusters gave him the lift he needed to launch in the air, sending him upward at a forty-five-degree angle. As the vessel gained speed, he had to juke the controls to the left, narrowly avoiding contact with an enemy fighter.
Vincent came up to his left as they high tailed it to break atmosphere. The com net went crazy, chatter from every battle occurring all around them. Pilots on the surface and in space competed with the ground crews. They all seemed to be on the same channel but someone in control fought to move them about, grouping them up.
A couple stray shots caught Desmond on the shields. He resisted the urge to veer away, glancing down at his scanner. It took him a moment to find the right screen. Sweat broke on his back. The red blips were moving away, two green ones came racing up from behind. The com chatter died down until only one voice came through.
"This is Lieutenant Darnell coming up on your six. I'm guessing you two aren't enemy hijackers hoping to make a quick getaway. Identify yourselves."
"Captain Desmond Bradford and Commander Vincent Bowman. We're on our way to the Gnosis to take command there. Darnell, are we clear to orbit or is there more action going on up here than we know about?"
"The primary fight's happening down below," Darnell said. "You might find a few guys on their way down here to cause some trouble though. Be on your guard." He paused. "We have to get back to the action. Good luck, gentlemen though I hope you don't need it. This is one hell of a day."
The allied ships pulled away, plunging back toward the surface.
"He's not kidding," Vincent added. "Control cleared the line. Looks like Admiral Reach is on."
"Admiral, this is Captain Bradford, do you copy?"
"I do, where are you?" Reach shouted the words. "All hell's breaking

loose down here so I hope to God you got on board the Gnosis."
"Negative, we're on our way," Desmond said, "but we're sending some marine reinforcements down right away. They should be there soon."
"Thanks, I guess we can be glad we sent a force to take care of those traitors. According to Dulain, they'd probably be here right now. Some signal came in to warn someone on the base. So I guess we've got that going for us right now."
"Damn." Desmond paused as the sky turned gray. They were on the verge of breaking orbit. "Sir, I need to go. We're almost to the Gnosis. I'll talk to you when we're on board and moving into position. Keep me informed if there's anything else we can do. Bradford out." He switched over to Vincent. "You ready for this mad dash?"
"As I'll ever be, I guess. Scans show we've got quite the crowd between us and the ship. Can't say I'm excited about that dash."
"Yeah, well … it'll be your excitement for the week." Desmond took a deep breath as they left the atmosphere, the sky turning black with only stars sparkling out in the distance. Without wind resistance, the ship handled in a totally different manner, responding instantly to any stick motion. *I have to get used to this*.
A battle raged out ahead of them, Pahxin and human ships meeting the Tol'An invaders. Energy beams lit up the darkness, flashing brightly enough to reveal the source of the attacks, giving away their rapid movements. Desmond turned to his scanner to get a better look, watching as ships flipped and spun in impossible maneuvers, all in the course of combat.
"Not that I needed it," Desmond said, "but I have a newfound respect for our pilots. Jesus Christ."
"And we get to fly right down the middle of all that noise." Vincent chuckled. "Well, we could also go around but I've plotted the course and it would add several minutes to the trip."
"Bradford to Gnosis, come in."
"Zach here, sir. What's your position?"
"We're in orbit but maybe you could come meet us halfway. There's a pretty big fight we'd have to get through and I'd rather be out there for as little time as possible. You guys able to pull away from what

you're doing?"
"The real action is a ways off," Zach replied. "I can break from where we're at. I'm sending you some rendezvous coordinates. See you there in a moment."
"That's something." Desmond squared his shoulders. "Alright, Vincent. Let's make this happen, huh? Time to see what we're really made of."
***

Christina entered the briefing room, finding Dulain sitting alone with his tablet. She paused just inside the door. The building kept shaking from random explosions and raging conflict. Aircraft screamed by overhead, emitting booms loud enough to make ears pop, the roar of their engines lingering long after they left.
"Comfortable?" Christina asked. "I thought you would be in the control room by now."
"No point," Dulain replied. "They're running this battle. I'm locking down security corridors."
"Don't you think their people are on that?"
Dulain shook his head. "No, or I wouldn't be doing it." He paused. "They clearly want the Orbs but the scary thing is, if you look at their landing pattern, they're not here to collect anything. I think they want to blow them up. If I'm right, this battle is a lot more important than anyone realizes."
"If all four of those go up …" Christina pinched the bridge of her nose. "We'd lose half the continent."
"Exactly." Dulain smirked. "See why I'm here?"
"What can I do to help?"
"I'm not sure. Did we apprehend the traitor?"
"Yes, he was a major who escorted the Pahxin ambassadors on their first visit. Apparently, they'd been compromised and as a result, this guy got involved. He supposedly has connections with some ass who runs a mercenary unit. That's who our people are fighting out there right now."
"Figures. What were they, cousins?"
"I don't know, probably in-laws. We won't know any more than that

until we can properly interrogate him and considering what's going on, that might be a while." Christina approached, looking over his shoulder. "Did Cassie go up to the Gnosis?"
"No, she was in the medical bay. I doubt she left."
"I'm going to contact her. See if she can get in the game." Christina stepped away, engaging her com. "Agent Alexander, come in."
"Christina? Hey! I'm glad to hear from you. Where are you?"
"We're in the big briefing room," Christina said. "Are you still in medical?"
"Negative. I'm making my way to control. We're sort of taking the long way considering how jammed up the hallways are."
"Who's we?" Christina asked.
"I have a civilian in tow. What's your status?"
Christina glanced at Dulain before answering. "We're locking doors. Trying to prevent the enemy from getting to the Orbs."
"Are they Tol'An?"
"Yep." Christina sat down. "The good news is we probably prevented their allies from joining the battle by attacking them first. Of course, that left us a little light on defenses. At least for now. All those Pahxin military folks up there are getting involved. Shouldn't be long before we get an influx of ground forces."
"Okay, if you think of something we can do …"
"You should get your civilian to a shelter," Christina interrupted. "You can't drag someone around like that."
Dulain cleared his throat. "We have a problem but Cassie seems to be in a position to solve it. One of the doors isn't responding to automated messages but she's close enough that she should be able to get over there and take care of it manually. I'm pinging her tablet near there at least. I'm sending her some coordinates. Have her get over there ASAP."
"We have a task for you," Christina said. "I'm not sure how dangerous it is or if it's a good idea to bring your civvy but we need a door locked down manually. Can you take care of it?"
"Yeah, I see where it is. We're nearly there now. Shouldn't be a big deal."

“Who is the civilian you’re with anyway?”
“Um …” Cassie paused. “My sister.”
“I’m guessing she’s regretting her decision to come visit you,” Christina said. “Of course, if we fail here it won’t matter where someone is on the planet. Earth will be done. Get that door locked. I’m going to check on the defenses around the Orbs. Dulain will coordinate us from here.”
“You’ve got it,” Dulain said. “I’ll start up a secure, private line. Damn it!” He sighed. “Some of them have entered the base. Be careful, guys. They’re going to move quick but probably don’t know how to get where they’re going. You could encounter them anywhere as they navigate the corridors. I’ll track them the best I can.”
“Thanks.” Christina checked her weapon, ensuring a round was chambered. Satisfied, she headed for the door. “Least we won’t be bored during this little invasion. Oh well. Back into the fray then.”

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Chapter 6

Captain Kent led seven men down into the bowels of the militia base. He prepared himself for impact, for being shot by an energy weapon that would tear through his armor and kill him instantly. Still he pressed on, swallowing his fear while keeping an eye on the scanner on the lower left of his HUD.

Dashwood paced behind him, two stairs up. They had to go down single file as the armor was too wide for anything else. Stealth was out of the question. Every footfall sounded like a forklift crashing into a wall. Eight of them doing it made a cacophonous sound. Anyone down below knew exactly when the marines would come out.

Kent paused for half a moment to look at the scan. If he darted to the left, he'd get to some cover though he wasn't sure what exactly he'd be hiding behind. It could've been metal, rock or grate. Depending on which, he'd find himself exposed or safe. Any enemies waiting to shoot at them must've wanted something more than his legs.

"I'm going in," Kent called to the others, dashing into the room then throwing himself to the left. He found himself in a small alcove, probably a guard post under normal circumstances. There was an exact copy of the space opposite him. Both sported a desk and a couple terminals. "Dashwood, cut right when you get in here."

Dashwood complied, hurrying into the room. The moment he showed himself, a beam slapped the wall only inches above his head. He ducked, returning fire before crouching in the cover. "Everyone stay back!" He shouted. "Get back up the stairs. They've got the area covered!"

Kent aimed his weapon, using the camera on top to get a look at the situation. A short hallway ended in what appeared to be another cargo space. *This stuff feeds the hangar down here. This is one of their supply routes.* He only saw one man out there but he felt certain the guy wasn't alone.

Another beam danced from that one enemy, hitting the wall just below his gun. He drew back with a curse.

“Just one that I saw,” Kent said. “But I’m doubting it. Thoughts?”
“Rockets,” Dashwood replied. “I’m all about hitting them hard.”
“This place could come down!” Another beam hit the wall. “Screw it, you’re right. Let’s just do it.” He brought up the targeting with his rockets, leaning out for a decent line of sight. Dashwood did the same. They fired together, dodging back into cover. The HUD scans showed the rockets streak through the hall, narrowly missing the walls as they barreled toward the crates.
A scream sounded moments before explosions rocked the building. Com chatter lit up, asking if they were okay. Rocks fell, massive stones collapsing until sunlight beamed into the room through the gathered smoke and dust. Kent looked out, peering into the room above them that had been battered by shuttle fire.
“That … might’ve been overkill.”
“No doubt, but it must’ve worked,” Dashwood said. Another beam fired, this time at the stairs.
“You were saying?”
“Oh screw this!” Dashwood dashed from his cover, charging out into the open. Kent sighed, following after him. The others came pouring down the stairs, cutting down the hallway in rapid order.
More beams blasted at them from at least three different sources. One seared Kent’s left shoulder, another caught one of his men in the chest and the third blasted Dashwood on his right hip, spinning him in place. He collapsed on the ground, rolling to his stomach to return fire.
The others opened up, their weapons barking in the confined space. Even with the hole in the ceiling, the sound was enough for Kent’s helmet suppression to kick in full bore. He barely heard the pops of each round discharging. Red mist exploded behind one target, his limbs flailing as he danced backward.
One turned to run but Kent caught him in the lower back, nearly cutting him in half. The body collapsed so fast it was like something slapped it from above, pinning him to the floor in an instant. The final one aimed directly at Kent, smiling a split second before he pulled the trigger … and nothing happened.

The man's eyes went wide. He pulled the trigger again. Kent aimed his own gun at the man but before he could open his mouth, a rifle barked. The enemy's head snapped back, blood exploding from the back of his skull as he collapsed in a pool of gore. The weapon scattered away, skidding into the rocks.

"So much for prisoners," Kent muttered. He turned back to Dashwood. "Hey! How bad is it? You hurt?"

"I don't think so," Dashwood said. He rolled on his back. The armor was melted but no meat was visible. "I'm a little numb down there … like being punched really god damn hard. Can you see the bone?"

"No," Kent replied. "Can you move it?"

He bent his knee, sucking breath through his teeth. "Well, it doesn't feel good but it must not be broken."

"Then get your ass up, we have to get down to the hangar." Kent hoisted him to his feet. He checked on the other men. Moll took the shot to the chest and though he hadn't died, he was out of action since breathing hurt. The other was already up and ready to go, stretching his arm. "Looks like we're good on that front."

"Let's get a look at these toys they were zapping at us with." Kent approached one of the high-tech weapons lying on the ground. The thing was barely the size of a submachine gun though the barrel was extra wide, accounting for the width of the beams they saw. "Jesus. That thing looks nasty."

"Too small to use with the armor," Dashwood said. "Looks open enough to bring the rest of the guys in."

"You're right." Kent got on the com, pausing to look at the hole in the ceiling. "You guys can catch up now if you're done mopping up. There's an entrance inside the building without using the stairs too. You won't have to go single file but hurry up. We're making the final push to the hangar and having you at our backs would be nice."

"We moving on?" Dashwood nodded. "Let's go, boys! Next hallway!"

They moved up, around the rocks and to a larger hallway. A heavy breeze rushed along, whistling as it cut through the grates. Kent checked the scan, frowning at the large number of enemy blips. He moved out, aiming his weapon as he went. He saw figures some

hundred and fifty yards away, running away.
“They’re fleeing alright,” Kent said. He picked up the pace, moving into a brisk jog. “Shuttle three, are you in position to stop any traffic from this hangar?”
“I’m a little busy!” The pilot shouted back. They heard blaster fire rumbling the rocks all around them as heavy guns went off. Kent’s scanner showed that some kind of power was surging over and over again, a fully automatic defensive emplacement. Another high-tech toy from the Tol’An no doubt. “This gun is all over my ass! Shuttle two, I need some help!”
Shit, I hope he can last until we get there. Kent broke into a sprint, firing his weapon as he ran. The first few bursts got lucky, tearing through the legs of some of his targets. Return fire filled him with some relief: conventional weapons this time. No more laser guns. *They left those people behind to delay us but what for?*
Where were these people going to go that they wouldn’t be found again? Kent shoved the questions out of his mind. The others opened up as well. They started cutting through the enemy ranks, even as bullets tapped their armor, ricocheting off their torsos and arm pieces. That was what happened to the men topside: they didn’t stand a chance with their gear.
“Grenade!” Dashwood’s voice made the speaker crackle as he shouted. The marines dodged to the side, moving against the walls as the grenade went off. Tiny shards of metal popped in all directions at high enough velocity to stick *into* their power armor.
Kent held his arm up to defend his head, drawing back to see a dozen fragments stuck a quarter inch into the metal of his bracer. More grenades followed, half a dozen rolling near them. The marines hopped backward, using their jump jets to clear the detonation radius. As the ordnance went off, dust drifted down from the walls.
The enemy seemed to round a corner, taking themselves out of line of sight. It had to be the hangar. Scans saw another energy surge, this time not the weapons but engines from some kind of ship. Kent used his jump jets to buy some distance, hurling himself down the hall. He’d never tried something like that before and struggled to navigate,

to avoid the walls and ceiling.
He couldn't slow down as he approached the corner, blowing past it and nearly slamming into the rocks at the end of the corridor. Men were loading up on troop transports. A couple fired at him but most sprinted straight for the safety of the ships. Five ships occupied the space, each of them firing up their engines.
Kent fired his remaining rockets into the room, the explosives whistling as they covered the short distance to their targets. Other marines arrived just as the first of his four attacks connected with one of the troop transports. The doors were not quite closed and they hadn't powered on any shields.
Metal buckled, the engines flared and a moment later went up in a massive explosion. The force knocked the marines backward into the wall, a section of hull plating burying itself in the wall only three feet from Kent's head.
Collateral damage from the blast nudged one of the other ships and it rocketed forward, slamming into the wall. It settled on the ground, lopsided as the landing gear failed and buckled. Smoke poured from the thrusters, the lights fading out.
One of the ships launched, pulling veering hard as it pulled away. The next tried to follow it but was rewarded with half a dozen rockets from some of the other marines. It started to climb then plunged toward the earth, fire streaming out of the rear. Fire from the destruction appeared briefly in front of the hangar then faded out.
The final ship was stuck behind the others but before Kent could say anything, the other marines arrived, plowing into it with a full salvo of missile fire. Dashwood shouted for everyone to take cover. Each of the soldiers dashed away from the carnage as the mountain itself seemed to respond with a massive quake.
Rocks started falling around them, larger boulders obscuring the path. Kent darted around them, using his jump jets once again to give him some speed. This time, he was far more reckless, bouncing off the ceiling, hitting the walls, and plowing through some of the smaller obstacles.
He risked a glance behind him. The tunnel was collapsing. Urgency

filled his chest but he had only fifty yards to go to get back to the room with no ceiling. Other men rocketed past him. He pressed himself harder. Every time something fell, it made the whole world shake violently.

Kent hit his rockets just as he entered the room, flying straight up and through the destroyed ceiling. A moment later, he saw clear sky around him. Coming down swiftly, he landed clumsily, rolling several times before sliding to a halt. Others landed around him, some gracefully, some as poorly as he did.

Dashwood offered him a hand. “That was a hell of a thing, huh?”

Kent took his hand, though he wasn’t ready to stand. He panted, trying to catch his breath. “You’re way too calm about that.”

“Hey, at least you didn’t get shot.” Dashwood looked at his arm. “Much.”

“Shuttle three,” Kent got on the com. “Are you okay? Is that gun taken care of?”

“Gun is down,” another pilot answered. “Shuttle three took a direct hit and had to fall back. Ground forces on backup took some fire as well. They mopped up a few conventional forces trying to slip out.”

“Mission complete,” Kent said. “I need a casualty report. Rally at the center of the base for pickup. I’ll call back to base to let them know. Good job, everyone. That was one hell of a brawl.”

***

Mustang Squadron Leader Dennis Arden dodged an attempt to ram him, nearly colliding with a passing Pahxin ship. Traffic was thick in that particular sector as enemy ships attempted to dart for Earth. Those who remained in space attempted anything to keep the defending forces busy, including collision.

Charger lost two ships to Kamikaze style attacks and the Pahxin suffered casualties as well. The fight started suddenly, drawing all pilots from their leave to jump into the fight. Tol’An forces came on with a real purpose, bringing multiple capital ships and sending far more fighters than they’d seen in the past.

This seemed to be their full commitment, the sort of assault Dennis's people were planning to initiate against them. He couldn't imagine they thought they'd win, or even survive the engagement. A chilling thought told him they had no intention of getting back. They well may have come for a suicide run.

The Tol'An pilots certainly seemed to be.

Dennis pulled up and spun, letting an enemy ship pass beneath him. He pulled up hard, firing his weapons in several short bursts. He got his target, cutting through the weaker shields near the thrusters. It went up a moment later, just as several hits scattered over his own ship from the left.

He dove, a desperate maneuver to escape the barrage but it kept up until his shields were nearly depleted. The persistent attacker positioned itself behind him, firing again. Another series of shots blasted him, whittling down the shields to less than ten percent. Dennis pulled off more evasive maneuvers but he couldn't shake the man.

"Need some help over here," Dennis called. "Anyone able to get this guy off my ass?"

"I'm on it," Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring replied. "Oh, he's all over you."

"That's why I'm talking right now." Dennis climbed, pulling up so hard, he felt like he might pass out from the g-force. This time, his attacker couldn't match the motion, not to the same extreme. Checking scans, Dennis groaned. His opponent still had a reasonable firing solution and moved into position. "Any time, Shane!"

"Relax," Shane said.

The enemy fired, a clean miss.

"I'm not really in a position to relax, man!"

Light flashed behind Dennis, his scans going dark. He glanced over his shoulder as Shane joined him. "Your playmate was low on shields. Just had to catch up really fast."

"Appreciate the save." Dennis started to say something else but a message came in from the Gnosis.

"Mustang One," Zach Caplan said, "I need you to form an escort and

immediately divert to the coordinates I've sent you for escort duty. Respond."
"Escort duty?" Dennis laughed. "You have got to be kidding!" He jogged his controls to the right, saving himself from an incoming missile. Defensive flying occupied his thoughts for a moment before he could continue the conversation. "In case you haven't noticed, it's a little rough up here."
"Understood," Zach said. "But Captain Bradford and Commander Bowman are incoming and I don't want them blown out of the sky because we were too busy to help them. Can you get there?"
"Damn it," Dennis muttered. "We're on our way." He switched over to Shane. "Two VIPs are making their way to the Gnosis. Let's make sure they get there. You ready for some crazy flying? The kind that will probably get us killed?"
"That's all we've been doing today," Shane said. "I'm in."
The two pilots pulled out of the fight, hitting their afterburners to pull away. No enemies chased them. There were far too many other pilots to mess with. The Pahxin alone probably could've handled them but the force was so large, it seemed prudent to put everyone in the air at the same time.
Better that than risk the base, the larger ships or civilian populations.
"Captain Bradford," Dennis called into the com. "Do you read me? This is Squadron Leader Dennis Arden. Please respond."
"This is Bradford," the voice came back, practically giving Dennis a heart attack. He checked and confirmed that the captain was on fast approach in a fighter. "Are you guys coming to help?"
"Flight Lieutenant Goring and I, yes," Dennis said. "Begging your pardon, sir, but was this the best option? Have you been behind a flight stick recently?"
"Been a few years," Bradford said. "But I'm remembering some things. I'd rather not have to get in a fight though if it's all the same to you."
"Perfectly understand." Dennis swallowed hard, checking the scans. They would have to pass through some fringe enemy activity before they arrived at the ship. "We'll try to keep things as smooth as possible but there are enemies in the way. Um … just follow our lead I

guess." He switched to a private com with Goring. "Can you believe this?"

"Nothing surprises me anymore," Goring replied. "I have to talk to them. Switching to open channel. Um … Captain? Pull your nose up by twenty degrees, please. Commander, follow suit. When we hit the afterburners, remember that it's going to be a real kick to the face. You'll want to fight the urge to pass out."

"Understood, Flight Lieutenant," Vincent said. "Thank you for the tip and we're ready to go."

"Let's do it." Dennis took a deep breath. "Engage afterburners now."

The thrusters engaged, pressing Dennis into his seat with that all too familiar force. Captain Bradford grunted over the line as he did the same. Neither of the officers would be used to such activity, certainly not in a combat situation. Shane's idea was sound: aim them at the Gnosis and have them go in a straight line.

That would leave Dennis and Shane to handle any incoming attackers. As they raced ahead, scans picked up three incoming fighters on an intercept course. Dennis groaned internally. "I'm sure you guys see them. They're heading straight for us." He wondered why they would bother, what specifically would draw their attention to the four ships on the edge of the combat zone.

They must think we're important. A number of shuttles had made their way to larger ships. Maybe they realized some fighters might be picking up the slack. *Time to drive these guys off and buy them some time.* "Shane, break formation and draw their fire. I'll back you up. Captain Bradford, maintain heading and speed. You should be at the Gnosis in three minutes."

Dennis pulled away, banking to the left while Shane went for the right. They would come at the attackers from two angles. When he saw their attack pattern, he cursed under his breath. *They're on one of their damn ramming courses!* The three ships barreled straight for Bradford and Bowman, engaging their afterburners to pick up speed.

"Sorry, guys," Dennis said. "I know what I just told you but you're going to have to initiate some evasive maneuvers. These idiots aren't here to shoot you down. They want to ram you."

“Are you serious?” Vincent asked. “Christ, what’s wrong with these people?”
Bradford replied, “they’re playing what they think is the final game. I’m not surprised we’re seeing this kind of behavior. We’ll take care of ourselves, Dennis. Do what you have to do. Take them out.”
“I’ll do my best.” Dennis checked the scans for distance. They were still out of effective range. He fired anyway, hopeful it might fend them off or at least startle them out of formation. The energy beams came close but the ships didn’t so much as flinch. *Okay, so they’re determined. Fantastic*.
Shane started shooting, he gained a little more ground than Dennis. He fired rapidly, continuous shots as he barreled toward his targets. The first one took a full spread of shots, exploding in a spectacular fashion, almost as if he didn’t have his shields on at all. Scans indicated something else, a massive energy reading like a generator going critical.
The other two ships were moving swiftly enough to avoid any appreciable damage. It proved lucky for them that the destruction of their friend took a few brief moments or they might’ve been annihilated right along with him. *That would’ve been terribly convenient*, Dennis thought. *But what are they doing to their ships?*
“Do you have any idea what that is?” Dennis asked. “I haven’t seen anything like it before.”
“The shield generators,” Vincent said. “They’ve got them running hot so that when they hit something, they’ll cause more damage with their explosion. That’s insidious. Shit, they’re getting really close.”
Bradford pulled up, spinning once before resuming his course. Vincent went the opposite direction, splitting the enemy forces as they each broke to follow one of the targets. Shane spun around, going after the one chasing the captain. Dennis moved to intercept the remaining vessel.
“These guys are desperate!” Bradford shouted. “He’s firing!”
Dennis glanced, watching as the enemy ship took some shots. Bradford dove, initiating too severe of a maneuver. It got him out of the way, but he made some serious noise about it over the com. Shane

was catching up, moving into a perfect firing solution behind the target. Just as the enemy tried to dive, it took a full blast of energy beams straight to the tailpipe.

It started spinning as the other thrusters engaged, tossing them in all directions before the vessel finally exploded just as spectacularly as the first.

"Get him back to the Gnosis!" Dennis called. "I've got this one!"

The final enemy tried to catch Vincent but he proved to have a little more finesse on his controls, keeping himself just out of harm's way with clever motions to the left and right. Dennis dropped in behind and fired, scoring a clean miss just below his target. This time, the enemy responded, climbing to avoid another attack.

"Bingo," Dennis said. "Commander, veer hard left and catch up with the captain. I'll drive this guy off."

Vincent complied. The pursuer tried to catch up, pulling around to follow. Dennis blasted him right on the side, though he was far too close. As his target exploded, Dennis flew straight through the fire, his shields repelling the debris. *Thank God they juiced those generators up or the pieces would've been too big to fly through*.

"That's the last of them," Dennis said. "Are we clear to the Gnosis?"

"We are," Shane said. "Their automated guns are online and should be able to provide cover the rest of the way."

"Nevertheless, we're going to escort them to the end." Dennis drew a deep breath. Only then did he take a look and note his shields had barely crawled back up to thirty-five percent. Flying through the destroyed ship brought him back down to twenty. *Lord, that was far closer than it needed to be*. "Captain, how're you guys doing?"

"That was more excitement than we wanted," Desmond said, "but we made it. Great job, both of you and thanks. We appreciate the help."

"No problem." Dennis turned to his scanner, picking where they'd go next in the fight. They would rejoin the other human ships in fending off the fighters, trying to keep more larger ships from entering the Earth's atmosphere. That was their lot in life for the foreseeable future, but at least they kept two flag officers alive.

If nothing else, we have that victory. Phew.

***

“We have to make a detour,” Cassie said. “Shouldn’t take us long.” She checked her tablet for the fastet path. “Yeah, no problem at all. Just a few minutes out of our way and we’ll have kept this place safe. Come on.”

“Wait!” Tammy grabbed her arm. “What’s happening anyway? Who are we dealing with? What enemy is this? Are they aliens? And what’re you defending? I don’t understand any of this, Cassie! What is it that you even do? You’ve never made it clear and this … this seems a lot more dangerous than what I thought!”

“We don’t have time to discuss it right now.” Cassie pulled her along and they got moving. “I’m with intelligence. You knew that meant clandestine stuff.”

“You were an analyst I thought! A computer person for God’s sake!” Tammy moved after her, still complaining. “Now you’re carrying around some machine gun and we’re going off to do something crazy! I don’t like it! Can you just be honest with me? What is it you really do and how long have you done it?”

“I’m an agent,” Cassie said. “And that doesn’t mean just hanging around behind a computer terminal. I’ve learned how to do all kinds of things. Think of me as … I don’t know. A spy. That’s probably the best description though … not entirely accurate … can we talk about this when I’m not worrying about being shot at?”

“If you tell me who might shoot us, yes.”

“The Tol’An. Haven’t you heard about them? The jack asses that attacked us before? They’re doing it again and this time, it looks like they want to do something that might well destroy the entire planet. Believe me, we do *not* want them to get inside and get to their objective. It’ll be way worse than you can even imagine.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tammy grunted. “They really want this bad! What have we done to them?”

“It’s what everyone’s done I’m afraid.” Cassie paused and checked their coordinates. They were getting close to the open door. “The

Tol'An believe they know better about how to run the galaxy. They're pushing hard to be the ones in charge. We're pushing back … with our allies, we're making sure they don't pretty much destroy society."
"They would do that? I thought they were terrorists. That's how the news described them at least."
"That's the best way to say it but they're zealots. They firmly believe in the righteousness of their cause. They see the way that everyone lives and think they know better. Unfortunately, it takes them to extremes. They'll commit suicide to forward their faith … and I suspect that's what their plan is today."
"You think they're here to die?"
"If they have to … those that are here." Cassie hummed. "I wonder how they think they'll take out the Pahxin if they lose so much here … that's an interesting question." She snapped her fingers. "If they had the help from that militia, they probably figure they'd have what it takes to repopulate their ranks. Wow. To think they might use humans in their military."
"That sounds bad." Tammy shushed suddenly. "Did you hear something?"
Cassie hadn't. *If you'd shut up, I might've*. She kept the thought to herself but it was hard. "Sh." She held up her hand, slowing to a walk. They were in one of the normal corridors, metal walls and floor flashing red under the flashing lights. Just a hundred feet away, they needed to turn right to get to the door.
Footsteps made Cassie stiffen. Two sets. She pressed Tammy against the wall, aiming her weapon. A man emerged, holding an assault rifle. It took her only half a second to realize he was dressed in the Tol'An black uniform. He turned in her direction just as she aimed her weapon, depressing the trigger.
Three rounds popped from her weapon, echoing off the walls and ceiling. Cassie's ears started ringing, Tammy screamed. The Tol'An fell to the ground, blood pumping from his chest and throat for only a few moments before he died. "Wait here!" She shouted the words, charging to the body.
Someone cried out in surprise around the way, speaking the Pahxin

language. Cassie hadn't picked up enough to understand his words, especially considering how quickly he was speaking. She lowered herself into a crouch, drawing a quick breath before risking a glance around the corner.

Three more Tol'An approached, moving cautiously. Cassie drew back just as they started firing, lighting the area up with beam weapons.

"Run!" She shouted at Tammy, charging down. She had to grab her sister as she ran by, the woman stood paralyzed. She clomped after her until they rounded a corner. Cassie stopped.

"What're we doing?" Tammy shouted. "We have to go!"

"Sh!" Cassie waved her hand at her, then aimed her weapon down the hall. The Tol'An came, running after them at a full sprint. She unloaded her magazine, spraying the weapon to lay down the maximum amount of fire in the smaller area. At least one of them took several shots to the chest and body.

Beams blasted down the hall, their unnerving hum competing with pain filled screams. Cassie checked for an alternative route to the door but they would be going in the opposite direction if they fled. Cassie waited for the fire to die down and leaned out again, shooting back. Two of their pursuers were on the ground.

The third remained standing by leaning on the wall. She caught him in the shoulder and dropped him to the floor. All three writhed about.

"You should wait here," Cassie said. "I'm going to make sure they're dead … and get one of their weapons."

"Okay … is that a good idea?" Tammy asked. "And what do you mean make sure they're dead?"

"You don't want to know. Stay here!" Cassie ran out before her sister could ask any more questions, hurrying over to the nearest one. She kept her weapon trained on them, kicking the gun away from the man's hand. Checking them over, she found they had small tablets and weapons. "This all it takes to attack us, huh?"

The man muttered something in Pahxin and spat blood on the floor. One of the others expired. She picked up the beam weapon and checked it over. It was one of the standard Pahxin weapons, something she'd become passably familiar with. Aiming it at the man

on the ground, she pulled the trigger.
The beam lanced out and fried him in the chest, ending him in a second. “Guess it works.” The final man collapsed unconscious. Cassie sighed, considering him for several moments. She already didn’t like the fact she’d just executed a dying man but the other … he was unconscious.
I can’t leave him here to shoot someone else who comes along. Cassie grunted before shooting the man. “Tammy!” She called. “Let’s go. These guys are gone.” She checked her tablet, noting that they should be able to make up the time fast enough if they hurried. Had the Captain and Vincent made it to the Gnosis? How were they doing? The thought distracted her only for a moment. Tammy hadn’t come out. “God damn it,” Cassie muttered. “Tammy! We have to go!”
A man stepped out, dragging Tammy with him. Cassie immediately aimed the energy weapon at him as he pressed a pistol to her sister’s head. His black uniform was covered in soot and dust. Blood smeared his cheeks and he looked all around as if he expected to be jumped at any moment.
He shouted something in Pahxin, but Cassie had no idea what he was saying. She thought to turn on her tablet for it. If she did, would he think she was doing something? Would he shoot Tammy?
“Cassie!” Tammy shouted. “Help!”
“Working on it, Tam.” Cassie drew a deep breath and let it out. “Can you speak our language? I’d like to talk. Let’s figure something out, okay?”
The man glared, his dark eyes wide. It dawned on Cassie he might be afraid. With his buddies dead, he probably had no idea what to do.
Great, we happened upon the first Tol’An that doesn’t want to die and now he’s taken a hostage. She slowly waved her free hand in a downward motion. “Just let her go.”
He shouted something else, pressing the gun harder against Tammy’s head.
I have a shot, Cassie thought. *Am I good enough to take this?*
One mistake and she’d kill her sister, end her life right there but this gun didn’t have recoil to contend with. It wouldn’t move at all when

she fired. Maybe if she could get Tammy to move to the left a little, just enough to provide a better target. He didn't understand their language after all.

"Tammy, press your head against that gun tighter," Cassie said. "Press hard and move at least two inches."

"What are you talking about? That's crazy!"

"I'm not asking you," Cassie replied. "Do it now or you'll probably die."

"Damn it!" Tammy gritted her teeth as she pressed against the weapon, tears streaking her cheeks. She closed her eyes tightly, her whole body going tense. The Tol'An directed his attention down for a brief moment. Cassie fired, putting a beam right dead center of the bridge of his nose.

His body just turned off. No jerking motion, no parting shot. He just dropped to the ground but he dragged Tammy with him. She began to scream like a banshee, freaking out as she struggled to get free of him. Cassie rushed over and dragged her off, pulling her well away from him.

"Are you okay?" Cassie asked.

Tammy punched her on the arm. "What the hell was that? Press harder against the gun? Are you nuts?"

"Did I not just save your life?" Cassie scowled. "Come on! This is a tense situation! I didn't ask you to come here but I'll be damned if you don't get out!" She sighed, checking to be sure they weren't about to be ambushed again. "Be calm, okay? Believe me, neither of us has time for panic."

Tammy wiped her face, bending at the waist. She paced a little and finally nodded, looking her sister in the eyes. "Alright, let's do this. Whatever it is we're doing. I'm sorry … about losing my shit there. This is not my life … I've never seen anything this horrible. Never. And I hope I never do again. But if it's just for now, I'll keep it together."

"Thank you." Cassie patted her shoulder. "I don't mean to be rough on you. Let's go. I hope those were the only guys we'll encounter but God knows there might be more running around. In fact …" They got

moving and she contacted Christina. “Hey, I think I lost you for a bit. Are you there?”
“I’m nearly to the Orbs,” Christina said. “How about you?”
“We ran into trouble. Five Tol’An were in the base. I had to kill them.”
Cassie checked her tablet again. “We’re just about to the door.”
“Okay. Hopefully, there’s nothing going on down here. If that’s the case, then I’ll hang out until this is over but if there is … well, I could use some help probably.”
“I’ll drop Tammy off at the control room and join you as soon as possible. Cassie out.” She glanced back at her sister. “It’ll be over soon. At least the exciting part. I’m not sure how much better sitting it out will be but at least you won’t have to worry about anyone coming in and shooting you.”
“How is it that they can blow up the world from this place?” Tammy asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”
“A lot,” Cassie replied. “And it’s going to stay that way for now. Don’t worry. You’ll probably figure it all out soon enough. For now … just stay close. I don’t want you to get grabbed again.”

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Chapter 7

Ulian arrived on the bridge of the Stalwart, stumbling as the ship shook violently. He took his seat beside Morala, glaring at the view screen. They were engaged with four destroyers and a battleship. On their side, six destroyers were going toe to toe with the smaller ships but they all had plenty of guns to go around.

“Report,” Ulian said. “How’re we doing?”

“We’ve engaged their flagship,” Morala said. “Torqua’s ship took heavy damage. They’ve limped to the back of our lines but they might have to abandon ship. Our shields are steady at seventy-percent. After taking down two of their destroyers, I went for their throat. I believe Trall’s on that ship.”

“Viran, hail them.” Ulian gripped the armrests on his seat, settling in. He’d run to the bridge and only just caught his breath. “I’d like to try to appeal to Trall’s sane side … if he even has one anymore.” He shook his head. “I hope they tortured him into joining them because the thought of him doing so without coercion makes me sick to my stomach.”

Morala shook her head. “Begging your pardon, sir, but we should be sending this idiot to the afterlife. There’s no reason to parlay with them.”

“I have Commander Trall, sir,” Viran said.

“You never know, Morala.” Ulian turned to Viran. “Put him on the screen.” The younger Pahxin appeared a moment later, eyes set in a scowl. He wore his hair short and maintained a gaudier form of the Tol’An uniform. His old honors remained on the chest, badges from the various battles he’d fought. “It’s been a long time.”

“What do you want, Ulian? You and your friends can’t stop us from finishing our mission.”

“And what is your mission? Cause chaos?”

“If that’s why you contacted me, then I think we need to get back to the fight.”

“I want you to surrender,” Ulian said. “I want you to come back to

your people and stand trial for the crimes you've committed but I can make that easier on you if you help us with whoever is in charge of this ridiculous movement. Tell us where to find him, have all your men stand down, and I swear to you on my honor I'll make this right."
Trall laughed. "In our moment of triumph, you want me to give up? To throw away *my* honor?"
Morala stood. "You threw that away when you joined these scum!" She pointed at the screen. "We're giving you a chance you do *not* deserve!"
"Morala …" Ulian spoke her name in a firm tone. "She's not incorrect, Trall. The passion may not be what I'd convey but you *have* put yourself in this position. They're not honorable, attacking innocent people. And you know full well that you're trying to destroy an entire planet here of innocent people. Be sensible."
"How's this for sense," Trall said. The line went dead and a moment later, the ship shook. Ulian sighed.
"My apologies, sir," Morala said. "I … did not mean to speak out like that."
"It's alright," Ulian replied. "Don't think I didn't feel it too. I thought we could talk him down but even without your outburst, he set his mind to this a long time ago. Erda, focus all attacks on Trall's ship and fire at will. Burn it down."
"Yes, sir." The weapons engaged, the first barrage blasted out and tore into Trall's shields. Ulian prepared himself for a brutal fight. Until their other destroyers could break away and help, two battleships could take shots for a while. *Here we go, folks. Time to see who's still standing at the end*.

***

Gunnery Sergeant Geoff Heathrow found himself on guard duty by the Orbs, standing with several of his fellow marines. They'd been on leave, getting some much-needed downtime when they were ordered to the armory at once. When they arrived and found their power armor waiting for them, he wondered if they knew they'd be needed

all along.
Then to be relegated to remaining stationary, away from the action, Heat found that particularly annoying. At least they wouldn't have too many troubles maintaining the perimeter. He and the other six guys, each a veteran of several ops, would likely be able to hold off all but the most overwhelming force.
It took nearly twenty minutes before someone reported to them that they were facing the Tol'An. After that, he had a lot more confidence. He'd fought them plenty of times. The zealots came with numbers, but rarely skill. Their gear was decent. It packed a punch but he didn't worry about them. Not like he had during their first encounters.
Ironic that we were down here before, fighting them off. Heat shook his head. *Everything comes full circle except tomorrow, we'll be heading to* their *home territory, their base. Bastards deserve a real ass kicking for all the trouble they've been causing*.
"Incoming!" Sergeant Alex Gillet called. "I've got someone coming up on us!"
"Relax!" Christina Dawson shouted. "It's just me! I'm here to check in with the techs and you guys." She looked around. "I see no one's gotten this far yet."
"How does she know?" Private Kelly asked.
"No bodies," Private Erskin replied.
"Stow it," Corporal Earnest Vine spoke up.
"We've got this," Heat replied to Christina. "The techs are locked in and we've put a marine in there just in case. Whatever they're planning, they picked the wrong day to pull it off."
"Good." Christina rubbed her chin. "Hm. Let me in. I'll back your guy up until this is over."
Heat shrugged and tapped the panel, opening the door. Christina entered and he locked it again. He had two men positioned down the hall and two on the opposite side. Anyone who made it that far had a lot of hell to get through before they could cause any real damage. Even then, they'd have a lot of angry technicians, one marine and a special agent all ready to blast them. If they were indeed coming down to detonate the Orbs, Heat felt confident they wouldn't get very

far.
Explosions outside kept him on his toes, making him wish they could be out there helping their fellow marines. Heat watched the scanners, listened to the com chatter as they talked about hordes of soldiers charging the walls, ships exploding overhead from anti-aircraft munitions. It was crazy … but it could've been worse.
Captain Kent and his team wiped out the militia that had attacked Gamma Alpha before. That mission probably prevented another hundred soldiers from showing up with equipment to support them. Of course, they would've had more defenders but there was no telling whether or not that would've been enough to hold back such a force.
"Heat," Gillet called out. "I just heard from Agent Alexander. She's securing one of the outer doors, heading up to control."
Heat nodded. "Good. That'll prevent one more attack from coming this way." He checked the scans again. "I think we're good though. Most of the fighting's taking place up in the courtyard." *Which sucks for those guys. I guess we all have our duties but we're better suited for that fight, not sitting on our sorry asses down here*.
A couple gunshots exploded down the hall, the pops loud enough to be less than two hundred feet away. Heat exchanged a glance with Gillet. Their two men nearest the sounds advanced to check it out. Scans indicated people out there, five or six. Friend or foe wasn't painting them properly. He had no idea what to expect.
Surely, the Tol'An didn't make it all the way down here. Heat couldn't believe it. How could they possibly breakthrough? How many troops did they send? He got on the com, trying to connect to Cassie. He figured she might have some idea of what was happening out there, maybe got her fingers on the pulse while making her way toward them.
"Agent Alexander." She sounded winded when she answered.
"It's Heat. How close are you to being down here with the Orbs?"
"I'm just getting to the command center. What's up? Do you need me to hurry?"
"No, I was hoping you knew who was standing at our door." Heat paused as his men disappeared around a corner. "We heard gunshots.

Trying to determine who's about to pay us a visit."
"It's not me. Did Christina make it?"
"Yeah, she's inside. If you can find a way to be more useful up there then do it. We're stacked up down here." Heat looked at Gillet, motioning down the hall with his head. The man headed off to check on the others. "We'll keep hold down here. Check in with the Gnosis. I'm curious about what's happening there."
"Will do," Cassie said. "Talk to you soon."
The line went dead. A barrage of gunfire erupted down the way. Heat didn't hesitate, charging toward the action with his weapon leading the way. He came upon Gillet firing down the hall before ducking back into cover. One of the marines was down, lying flat on this back and another unarmored man had been half melted.
"What the hell?" Heat asked. "How many?"
"Six," Gillet replied. "Down from eight."
"That Private Pring?" Heat gestured to the downed marine in armor. Gillet nodded.
"He's still alive. Unconscious … injured … but if we get him medical aid soon, I think he'll be okay. They're using some pretty nasty energy weapons. Wish we would've brought ours. These older rifles are kind of sad compared to what we've gotten used to." Beams interrupted him, slapping the wall. "What're they trying to do, suppress us?"
"There are two ways in this area," Heat said. "They might be trying to distract us." He got back on the com. "Gillet and I are holding these guys down here. Keep your eyes open for anyone trying to come in from behind. Good chance they're attempting to flank us." He pointed at the hall with his weapon. "My turn to try?"
"Yeah, be my guest," Gillet said. "I already took care of two of them. I think you should deal with the rest."
"You're so dedicated to your job." Heat popped out and fired immediately, not bothering to aim. The enemies hit the ground but not before one of them caught a bullet to the forehead. He dropped backward, dead in an instant. His companions opened up like they were a firing squad, loading the wall up as Heat withdrew to cover.
"Jesus!"

“They’re dedicated,” Gillet said. “I say we let them come to us. We can do what they just did too. They know we can’t use our heavier weapons. No rockets and stuff. Or maybe they’re just maniacs who are willing to charge us because they figure one way or another, each of them is going to die today.”

“Chilling.” Heat turned to their downed marine, dropping low. He reached out swiftly, grabbing the man’s arm and dragging him back to safety. More energy beams lanced out, striking the floor all around the downed man, nearly taking Heat’s arm off in the prospect. “Sons of bitches! Seriously? Light those bastards up, Gillet!”

Gillet poked his weapon around the corner and opened fire without risking a look himself. His weapon barked, shell casings battering the wall before bouncing away on the ground. He aimed the weapon up and down, veering left and right as he rattled until he was empty. The spent magazine hit the floor with a hollow clatter and he slammed another one home. Heat checked the scans. Five men remained alive and they were stationary. He was about to say something when one of the others from the other side interrupted. “Contact!” Guns went off in that direction as well.

Just then the five men charged, racing forward. Heat continued dragging the marine back toward the Orb room. Gillet moved backward, aiming his weapon to give them some cover. The others reported multiple contacts of at least ten people in the area. The fighting got thick as the hum of beam weapons competed with the rapid pops from high powered rifles.

The first of the terrorists darted around the corner. Gillet practically tore him in half with a quick burst from the left side to the right, just above the waist. The others followed without hesitation, leading with their beam weapons. Heat hit the deck, firing back. Gillet slammed against the wall as one hit his shoulder but he didn’t go down.

The firefight lasted less than eight seconds before all the Tol’An lay in pools of blood. Gillet’s armor was scorched in the leg, the shoulder and the side where he’d been grazed. The armor on Heat’s calf was hot but the padding between his skin and the surface protected him from severe burns.

“Report!” He shouted. “What’s going on?”
“We’ve got wounded,” someone shouted but they were so passionate it was hard to tell which man said it. “They don’t give a shit if we shoot them!”
“Damn it!” Heat got to his feet. “Can you help, Gillet?” He didn’t wait for an answer, rushing back for the carnage. “Scratch that question. Stay there and guard that passage. If any more come that way, I don’t want them flanking us. You’re on that duty.”
“Got it,” Gillet said. “Don’t think I really wanted to run just now anyway.”
“You’d better not be that hurt!” Heat called back. He hurried on toward the crowd of marines. They took turns popping out of cover and firing two at a time, one crouching, one standing. Heat’s scan showed they were facing more than fifteen men still with God knows how many bodies on the ground.
How the hell did so many of them get down here? Heat got on the com to control. They were being jammed. *This is incredible!* “Gillet!” He shouted. “We can’t talk to anyone down here!”
“Yeah, loud voices are the only way to go right now!” Gillet called back. “What do you want to do?”
“Let’s just finish this.” Heat looked at the men he was standing with. “They’re not going to stop and this one-off shooting isn’t going to help.” He directed them back toward the door. “Form a fire line over there. As they come out, blow them away. That’s the way to take care of this. I want two lines, front-line crouches, the other just above them.”
The marines fell back, forming the line. Heat got behind them, finding a decent firing solution to help. His scans showed the Tol’An were nearly on them. “Steady!” He shouted. “They’re just about here!”
Two terrorists bolted around the corner. They were cut down before they could even see what they were facing. The others charged in as well, each one acting like they were in some kind of Civil war reenactment complete with screaming. If they truly wanted to make their destination, if they were hopeful for completing their objective, they sure didn’t prove it.

A couple still got in a couple lucky shots before dying. Two of their front-line marines caught some energy beams, one to the head and another to the body. They went down, a death and severe injury but after a good half minute of constant firing, the Tol'An stopped coming. They finished them off.
The jamming of coms lifted as well.
"That was insane!" Heat got on the com. "Command, this is Heat. I'm down here at the Orbs and we just took out probably twenty Tol'An who charged us. What's the status?"
"Ground troops are contained up top," one of the men said. "We don't read any enemies within the base."
Heat groaned. "That's because we just killed them all! At least the ones we knew about. You'd better be on high alert!"
"Affirmative. We've got this."
"Uh huh." Heat shook his head. "Get the wounded over there. I'll call in a medical team. I can't believe they got this close! Stay vigilant, guys. If they try again, we have to be ready."

***

Desmond and Vincent disembarked their fighters and rushed to the bridge. When they arrived, Zach practically cheered. He relieved Deacon from the pilot's chair and took his place. They were not currently engaged in a firefight but there was plenty of action all around them. Salina put a tactical map up for them to see.
"The mainstay of the fighting has been kept away from orbit here." Salina drew a circle around a section of space. "That's where the majority of the large-scale battle is taking place. Our fighters have joined the Pahxin at these other locations. They're winning through attrition but we've taken some losses."
"How bad?" Desmond asked.
"Casualty reports aren't accurate yet but I've heard some ejections over the com." Salina paused. "Um … we have a problem."
"What's up?" Desmond squinted at the screen but didn't see what she was talking about.

“It appears one of the enemy destroyers …” Salina stood. “It’s charging Earth. It’s on a collision course.”
“You have to be kidding!” Vincent slapped his leg. “We have to stop that thing at all costs.”
“Are there any other ships engaged with it?” Desmond asked.
“Negative, it broke away from the others.”
“Get after it, Zach. Full speed, weapons hot.” Desmond scowled.
“That’s definitely one way to win the fight. Crash into Gamma Alpha.”
“Their own people are down there!” Vincent clenched both his fists. “That’s ridiculous! It’s insane!”
“It’s exactly the kind of thing these pricks do.” Desmond checked his screen, noting they would be on the target in less than three minutes.
“Time for it to hit orbit?”
“Six minutes,” Salina said.
“Christ, we’re cutting this close. Zach, can we do enough damage to stop this thing?”
“I think so, sir. Their shields are weak. Likely, they took damage in the fighting and decided they were going down anyway.”
“Might as well use the hulk for something useful.” Desmond shook his head. “That makes a sick kind of sense.”
They went silent on the bridge, watching the screen as the destroyer continued its plunge toward Earth. Battles raged outside, but the only thing Desmond could think about was catching that Tol’An vessel before it made orbit. If they were lucky, if they got there in time, they could prevent a disaster.
And if not … they might be homeless.
God, all those people. Some of our crew. Desmond drew a deep breath, casting aside his fears and focusing on the task at hand. They were almost on them. “Target their reactor. Light them up. Maybe we can have their own systems do some of the work for us. Especially if their shields are low.”
Zach tapped his terminal, nodding that he was ready. Deacon took the scan station normally occupied by Cassie. “Sir, I’m picking up a lot of com traffic from our allies … other Earth ships. They’re asking about that destroyer, seeing if anyone’s got it.”

“Let them know what we’re doing.” Desmond turned to Vincent. “We’ve got this.”
Vincent merely nodded. He stared so intently on the screen, Desmond could practically feel him willing them to go faster. The notion seemed ridiculous but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t trying as well. They might end up with seconds to save the base, possibly the planet if the Orbs went up at the same time.
“In firing range,” Zach announced. Desmond’s heart pounded in his chest. “Opening fire.”
The Gnosis weapons let loose, plowing into the destroyer. They didn’t stop, didn’t slow down. Much as Desmond hoped for supreme luck, he knew better. It would take more than a single pass to take down something so large. “Damage report,” he said just loud enough to be heard.
“Severe,” Salina said. “We’ve torn through their armor. Hull breach in the back. We need to hit them harder if we want to detonate before they enter atmosphere though.”
“Hit them again,” Desmond said. “And if it doesn’t work, initiate ramming speed.”
Zach glanced back but didn’t say anything. No one did. They knew the stakes and though it likely meant suicide, the planet came first. Even offering that decision made Desmond sick. He just decided for every soul on board that they would essentially have to die. *But what are the lives of us few for all?*
“Firing again.” Zach launched another series of blasts. Everything went at them, hammering the destroyer. The front of the enemy ship began to smoke, catching fire from touching the upper atmosphere.
“Direct hits all around!”
Desmond sighed. “We’re too late! It didn’t—”
Before he could finish the sentence, the destroyer exploded, bursting in all directions. Streaks of metal entered the Earth’s atmosphere, bursting into flames like shooting stars. Zach tapped his controls, slowing them down and veering off but the screen stayed on the glorious visual of that attack vessel disintegrating.
“The reactor went up,” Salina said. “As we hoped.”

“Yes!” Deacon shouted. He and Zach hooted. Desmond exchanged a look with Vincent, feeling like he’d just run thirty miles.
“Close enough for you?”
“Way too close.” Vincent shook his head. “We should join the Stalwart. Try to wrap this up.”
“I agree.” Desmond turned back to the screen. “Zach, put us on intercept with the Stalwart and get us there in a hurry.”
“Yes, sir.”
“Maybe we can wrap this up so we can meet the enemy on *their* turf.”

***

Ulian winced as the ship shook again, another direct blow from Trall’s ship. Their damage report showed minimal but the exchange wouldn’t be so benevolent for much longer. He checked his screen to see if the other ships had cleared up their fights yet, the various destroyers in the midst of their action but they were still occupied.
Larger fighters kept harassing them, but the smaller ships wouldn’t come near the battlecruiser for fear of being taken out by automated defenses. So they kept the smaller ships from helping. If even two of them could come to their aid, they’d likely make short work of Trall but without them, they exchanged broadsides as the humans said.
“Report from the ground,” Morala said. “Our troops helped quell the fighting on the surface. The Tol’An forces have been defeated.”
“That’s good news.” Urial frowned. “I wish that meant I could convince this maniac to surrender.”
“I’m picking up a message,” Viran said. “From the Gnosis!”
“Put it on screen.”
Captain Bradford appeared. “Hey there, Ulian. How’s it going?”
“I had quite the ride to get up here and now we’re in a punching match. How about you?”
“We had our own excitement but we’re on our way to you right now. Shouldn’t be long now. Can you use the help?”
“To tip the odds, yes.” Ulian checked his screen. “Can you take them on their starboard side? We’ve hit them there a couple times and

they've been redirecting to avoid us."
"No problem. We'll pound them just as soon as we're in range. Bradford out."
Ulian smiled at Morala. "Seems fate is on our side after all. That should be more than sufficient to finish this bastard off. Then, it's just a matter of mopping up."
"Do we have coordinates for the Tol'An base?" Morala asked.
"Yes, we were about to discuss the attack when this happened."
"I recommend we plot the course and head there as soon as this rabble is defeated." Morala lifted her hand. "Hear me out. They will not have time to prepare for us and have no idea whether they were successful or not. The longer we delay getting there, the better chance they have of digging in."
"Still rash." The ship shook again. Ulian grunted. "We'll worry about that after we've survived this conflict. Viran, where is the Gnosis?"
"Coming into range right now," Viran replied. "They're opening fire on the starboard side!"
"Sir," Morala said, "three destroyers have finished their targets and are joining in." Ulian stood, watching as Trall's ship took a swath of fire from multiple sources. The Stalwart joined in, tearing into the target with everything they had. Pieces flew off. The ship turned, trying to flee the battle.
"You can't get away, Trall." Ulian sighed. "Trying to flee after talking about honor … sacrificing all those men for no reason. This is disgusting."
"What did you expect from a coward and a traitor?"
"Self-destruct!" Viran shouted. "He's set his reactor to overload!"
"Fool …" Ulian shook his head. "Pull us back, Erda. Give that coward some room to die. Pull back all ships. I don't want anyone caught up in that parting shot." He wanted to spit on the floor. "You disgust me, Trall. I thought you were better than this … than all of this. Instead, you throw it all away for nothing."
Viran gasped. "Sir! I was wrong! No!"
"What?" Ulian spun. "What do you mean?"
"That's not a reactor overload! He just flooded the area with sensor

interference. That made it look like that. He's initiated his hyperspace drive!"
"That damaged?" Morala scoffed. "That fool will kill himself!"
"Possibly," Ulian said, "but at least we know where he's going." The ship winked out, escaping the system. "We'll meet up with you soon enough, coward." He turned to Viran. "Order all ships to initiate mop up duties. If any of the Tol'An wish to surrender, accept but ensure they aren't lying. I want all of this cleaned up ASAP. We've got somewhere to be."

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Chapter 8

Cassie sat in the shuttle, waiting to board the Gnosis. Gil still hadn't woken up from his coma. She felt lucky but alone with her thoughts, she also worried about ever having to do it again. Especially the next time when all the Orbs would likely be together. That prospect terrified her beyond belief.

Tammy remained in Gamma Alpha, staying in the shelter as the remaining Tol'An forces were rounded up or killed. Many of the smaller ships that still survived were too damaged to flee but continued to cause trouble as they fled toward the moon. Pahxin vessels chased them down to contend with them.

The Stalwart and Gnosis were being dispatched to the Tol'An base, a forward attack force before the rest of the Pahxin fleet arrived from their homeworld. Apparently, more than a hundred ships would arrive inside of six hours. The trip from Earth promised to only take two hours after their navigators worked together.

Intelligence suggested they would be dealing with a minimal force considering what just hit Earth. She wondered if they would encounter any ships at all besides Trall's damaged vessel. He limped away, tail between his legs. Would he even return home? Considering the cost of failure, she almost doubted it.

Then again, he had a twisted sense of honor, one which forced him to face the music. It all depended on how fickle he was feeling in her opinion. After all, if he could pick and choose what mattered to him, why wouldn't he put his life first over all other things? The greatest honor to cowards was remaining alive for one more day.

The shuttle landed at the same time as another one. When she disembarked, Heat and his team were as well. They were all the last people to have to board the ship before it departed for Tol'An space. She waved to him, offering a smile. He nodded, looking grim. She'd heard he lost a couple men during the fight.

Those marines have taken a serious beating since we started all this. Cassie headed out, head bowed. *I hope we find a way to make it up to the*

survivors.

"Cassie!" Vincent shouted from down the hall. He rushed over to her, pulling her into a hug. "God, I'm glad to see you! Are you okay?"

Cassie nodded. "I'm fine."

"You sure? Nothing going on up in the head?"

"Running around seemed to cure me," Cassie replied. "Anyway, how're you? I heard you had to fly yourself up?"

"In a fighter. It was a little wild. You ready for this?"

"Yeah. I can't wait for it to be done."

"Me either." Vincent gestured with his head. "Shall we head to the bridge? We're about to initiate hyperspace now that you're all aboard."

"That's where I was heading. Did you guys hear about who we lost on the marine front?"

"A couple more …" Vincent frowned. "Energy weapons. Lucky shots on our power armor can kill a man quick. Anyway, I don't have specifics. They've been logged in the report. I just haven't had time to go over it yet. We had the fastest war council I've ever seen, all done remotely with the different commanders on their various ships."

"Probably what we needed to do in the first place."

"How was your sister?" Vincent asked. "I never had the chance to ask how your meeting went then she ended up getting in the middle of this mess."

"She showed up to cut me out of her life," Cassie said. "I'm sure she's all the more determined to do that now after what happened. But at least she's safe. She's remaining in Gamma Alpha until we get back. I guess she wants to hear how the story ends since she got caught up in the final chapters."

"I'm curious myself." Vincent hit the elevator button and they boarded. "We have no idea what to expect when we get there. Could be next to nothing left. There's so much debris around Earth right now, they estimated we'll be salvaging junk and parts for over a year. Can you even imagine that?"

"And that's all the stuff that didn't burn up in the atmosphere." Cassie turned to him. "Did you hear some of those larger pieces of the

destroyer went down in the sea? They're being picked up by some navy or other. I guess it was big enough to send the water up more than two hundred feet into the air … though maybe the report exaggerated."

"Yeah, big chunks and some think that they'll be useful … like computer parts. I doubt it." Vincent rubbed his eyes. "That was one of the scariest chases I've ever experienced in my life. We knew what would happen if we didn't stop them … and only barely did. If they weren't already damaged, that could've been bad."

"You saved us all." Cassie took his hand and squeezed it. "Thank you."

"I would have to give all the credit to Zach, to be honest." The doors opened, interrupting more conversation. "We'll talk later, huh?"

"Of course." Cassie took her seat. "Good morning everyone. You'd think we'd get a rest after everything that happened, huh?"

Salina chuckled.

"At least we get two hours of downtime," Desmond said. "Welcome back, Cassie. I'm glad you're here. This is it, folks. Now that you're all here and we're about to drop into hyperspace, I think it's time to address the crew. Salina, put me on ship wide speakers. I've got a little something prepared."

Cassie leaned back in her seat as the connection was established, watching Desmond curiously.

"Crew of the Gnosis. Not long back, we were testing this vessel's faster than light capability. We jumped out to Pluto and were on the verge of conducted some further tests when our planet was attacked. Most of you were there with us that day, experiencing the dread of rushing back. Even that short jump home felt too long given the circumstances.

"When we arrived, we found ourselves faced with an alien foe, one we'd never even imagined. They were not necessarily more advanced but they definitely had an agenda, one which meant the theft of the very object that put us in space. We resisted them then and conducted a secondary mission, preventing them from acquiring a second device.

"That started the war with the Tol'An. They came to our home, our planet and assaulted us. We responded in defense but soon found

ourselves wrapped up in a conflict far more involved than a mere terrorist organization harassing a small planet in the Sol system. No, we found ourselves engaged with a zealous enemy intent on conquering known society.

"They want to run the lives of their brothers, the Pahxin. We're just a thing that's in the way, a thorn in their sides. We're good at that. Human beings have always stood in the way of bullies and criminals, always found the side of honor to be preferable to villainy. Today, we prove that conviction by taking up arms with our allies.

"Each of you has done a great deal to get here. I'm proud of you. We have all sacrificed so much. Equipment, ships, friends … the lives we've lost in this war will not be forgotten nor will they easily be forgiven. As we drop into hyperspace today, we will be racing toward the conclusion of this wretched organization.

"We will annihilate them and liberate the devices they've hoarded. Our Pahxin allies are even more motivated, having suffered at the hands of the Tol'An for far too long. Those of you who joined me when I came aboard the Gnosis hoped to become explorers. I'm here to tell you that this final obstacle stands between us and that goal.

"When we're done, we will finally see the stars, unafraid of those who would demand we live *their* way. Never forget, humanity does not back down to threats from scum. We are strong. *You* are strong. We will win the day as we won this conflict over our own planet. Thank you again for your hard work. I appreciate you."

Desmond waved his hand at Salina. She killed the connection. "There you go, folks. My speech for the day."

"Didn't sound too rehearsed," Vincent replied. He grinned. "You did a good job."

"I hope it inspires something other than sarcasm," Desmond said. "Anyway, I firmly believe all of that and those of you on this bridge with me, you've done exceptional work. I could think of no one else I'd rather be flying into battle with today than all of you. Thank you for being here."

Cassie turned to her station, peering at the screen. She also believed in what he said, despite the fact she felt like some sort of skepticism

should've kept her from glowing. Christina or Dulain would've scoffed, she thought but the speech gave her hope. The future shouldn't be about wars and secrets. It should be about discovery. That's what they wanted all along and when this fight ended, they would finally get it.

***

Gizan watched the vast majority of the Tol'An fleet depart the system, tucked safely amongst a cluster of natural debris. He couldn't help but smile as he considered how the opposition dwindled while the chances of his success increased. He would soon see Ezria face to face and conclude his business with the man once and for all.

His former master must've felt particularly safe to allow for so much of his force to depart. They revealed their destination to be Earth, a full-scale attack to destroy the Trindishas there and potentially cripple the human's ability to fight. Some of them were going there to die, sacrificed to the cause but Trall believed in his success.

The man came over the com a few times sounding smug as he gave orders. Gizan wished he would have the opportunity to sink a blade in that man's throat as well. He found him to be a foppish, conflicted buffoon willing to sell out his values and pride at a moment's notice for any reason.

Gizan questioned his own integrity as well but at least he left the Tol'An behind. Trall continued to bootlick, following orders from a total madman in the process. He was primarily motivated by revenge against the military that cast him out, which was a dangerous thing to play with. Ezria should've known better.

Calatha would have. He understood the universe and how best to approach problems. Violence was a final option, not the first. *I'll remind Ezria of this fact when I finish him off … though I suppose I may not be practicing the philosophy either.* Gizan shook his head. *But then I was not the chosen leader of the Tol'An either.*

Gizan didn't need a clear conscience. He didn't need to feel superior to his target. He merely needed to do away with him to find freedom. If

that meant sacrificing integrity, he did not care. The galaxy would be a better place without Ezria in it and when he was gone, then the last traces of the brief philosophical movement could fade.

We started with such positive notions. Help the people live properly. It became corrupted. Power twisted Ezria. He became convinced of his superiority rather than the cause to do away with corruption, debauchery, wickedness. They became the nightmares they hoped to abolish. Instead of paving the way for a peaceful society, they became criminals.

Murderers really. Calatha told Gizan that he would have to get his hands dirty, that he would be the blade in the night. That was acceptable given the goal, the end result but he never anticipated how far it would go. Converting people against their will. Conscripting individuals. Killing those who refused.

That was not the goal of the Tol'An, not originally.

"I'm ready to approach," Rythi interrupted his thoughts. "It'll take several hours but it's going to be even easier now with all those ships gone. Their scans seemed to be pretty decent but I've got ways around them. So … I guess what I'm saying is if you're ready to go, I'm ready to get you there."

"By all means, captain." Gizan patted the man on the shoulder. "Bring us in. I'd like you to bring up a topographical map for me so I can show you specifically where I'd like to land. Can we do that or are we bound to something specific to remain out of sight?"

"Well, we can't land in their hangar," Rythi said, "but other than that, we have few limitations. Visual is still a problem. My recommendation is we approach from the far side of the planet, drop low and fly close to where you want. We'll be under scans, out of sight and put down without anyone knowing we even entered the atmosphere."

"Indeed. You do know what you're doing. I'm good with this approach."

Rythi engaged the engines. "We basically do this with controlled, randomized bursts, maintaining a consistent speed. If for some reason they do find us, they'll think we're junk. Have you noticed the theme? Always look like debris. Everyone ignores trash, even when they

shouldn't."
"Yes, I wish I would've known this before … or at least understood it to the degree you do. In fact, you seem like the kind of man I needed on many jobs. A shame I was on an even darker side of the law than you are now. It makes for poor companions when you are wanted by every authority."
"I'm halfway there," Rythi said. "At least the Kalrawv Group leaves me alone for the most part."
"Soon, you will be free." Gizan stood. "I'm going to rest before we arrive. Wake me when you're an hour out. I'd like to be here when we're about to make our descent to the planet's surface. One last sleep before meeting my fate … and hopefully turning the tide for the entire galaxy."

***

Desmond sat in his office, staring up at the ceiling. Their rapid departure had not been how he envisioned the attack on the Tol'An. He anticipated more planning, time to work out the details while they compiled a larger fleet. All the different branches that wanted in on the action, all the military leaders were suddenly silenced in the wake of the attack.
An attack which took place over the planet and on a small section of one of the continents. Most of the world didn't even know about it until the media announced it. One of the Pahxin stated it the best: they needed to act quickly because as soon as the Tol'An leadership realized they'd lost everything, they might scatter to the wind.
If their enemies managed to pack up the Orbs and run off with them, they'd have to track them to a new place. No one had the stomach to let the situation linger any longer than it had to. Admiral Reach was able to use that to his advantage and run with it, ensuring that he had the authority to send the Gnosis with the Stalwart as forward scouts. No one believed the Tol'An had anything of significance to throw at them. Trall, the coward who ran at the end, might be there when they arrived but he couldn't stand against them both. Not when he barely

managed to do so while he still had his defenses up. The worst part of his fleeing involved the fact he would be able to warn his fellow terrorists.

The com drew his attention to the desk. “Captain, it’s Vincent. We’re about to emerge from hyperspace. Ten minutes.”

“I’m on my way.” Desmond grabbed his jacket and pulled it on, preparing himself for the final round. He didn’t anticipate there’d be anything left by the time the rest of the fleet arrived and he was okay with that. This situation felt personal, like something they needed to accomplish on their own.

Having the Stalwart along made it feel like two companions from some old story, finishing a task long in the making. Desmond couldn’t imagine another ship sharing the risk and glory with them. Rocky as they started out, he came to like Ulian and his crew. They were excellent representatives of their culture.

And soon, we’ll get to find out how well we all play together when there isn’t a threat looming over our heads. God, I hope we have the maturity to make this work. We don’t need another conflict … especially one we could not win.

***

Heat boarded a shuttle for what seemed like the hundredth time. He demanded to go on the final mission, to be the one to help bring the Orbs back to the ship. After everything he’d been through, nothing would’ve stopped him from getting out there, even if he did feel exhausted. The consistency of their missions was definitely getting to him.

Lieutenant Brent Fielding finally felt up to joining them and he’d be leading the mission. Heat knew the man hated sitting around on the ship waiting for them to get back. Just the way he sounded throughout the operations showed he wanted to be in the thick of things, despite the danger.

Especially when they procured the last Orb and dealt with the strange space station that affected men’s minds. Privately, Heat thought the

lieutenant should be happy he didn't have to go on that one. It very well might've resulted in his death. Heat thought he'd seen everything before they set foot in that place.

He was wrong.

Come to think of it, I can't believe the things I've dealt with. Mental connectivity to ancient alien relics, meeting a race of people who copied themselves into a computer, that haunted ass space station … They don't put this shit on a recruitment poster because people would think they were advertising for a movie, not the marines.

"You guys ready?" Fielding asked. The marines they had with them were an odd bunch, mostly comprised of men who had been with them since the beginning. Sergeant Gillet, Corporal Vines, Privates Kelly, and Erskin all made up the real veterans. In addition to them, Lieutenant Brady Dashwood came along and a Corporal Dustin "The Rat" Mink.

The last poor bastard supposedly dealt with the nickname since he attended boot.

The Pahxin planned on backing them up with twenty men total. Those numbers should've been overkill unless intel was grossly misinformed about the Tol'An numbers. Once the dust settled back at Gamma Alpha, they estimated the vast majority of their enemy's resources had been spent.

This trip is more of a coup de grace than an actual brawl.

The marines responded to Fielding with a determined, but quiet *ho-ah*. Only the two new guys seemed truly pumped up but then, they'd never been to space before. Both of them stared out the window until they went into hyperspace and even afterward, they kept carrying on about how incredible it was.

Heat didn't think he ever felt quite so enthusiastic about space but he hadn't heard any stories. These two marines heard the rumors about what they'd seen and done, how many battles they'd been in and all that jazz. Photos of the environments they visited circulated around Gamma Alpha, psyching people up to take to the stars when it was safe.

After so many people died during their missions, Heat couldn't help

but feel cold about the prospect of exploration. Yes, they technically found themselves at war, that didn't help him acclimate to those losses any easier. Part of him tried to justify it, talk about how the other soldiers knew what they were getting into but it didn't help.

The names immediately came to his mind. Privates Howards, Taras, Bosh, Wheeler, Dorian, Brock, and Singer … all gone. Corporal Willis Anderson, a man Heat had worked with prior to joining the Gnosis died in their last mission. They lost Lieutenant Colby Topper during the first time out.

That didn't count the entire team he'd barely met that lost their lives on their prior mission. They all bothered him, all bit right to the soul but the one loss that still got him down was his good friend, Sergeant Lawrence Gorman. He sacrificed himself for the team, saved them all. The heroics didn't make the loss any easier.

Heat always believed he'd remain in the military for life, retire there. As they prepared to hit the Tol'An planet, he realized this was likely his last run. When they finished, he would leave the marines, enter civilian life and try to put it all behind him. But before that happened, before he risked boredom in some crappy part of the world, he needed to finish the fight.

The ship started to shake. Dashwood looked around frantically. "Should we be worried about that? Was that okay? Are we cool?"

"We are," Gillet said. "I don't know what your problem is."

"Screw you, man. This is new to me!"

"We're fine," Fielding replied. "We've just left hyperspace. Depending on how close we are to the planet, this shuttle will launch soon. Considering who helped us with coordinates, I'm thinking we'll be pretty darn close. Should be a neat little run down to the surface, a brief fight into the complex and a hell of a time figuring out how to get the Orbs home."

"Piece of cake, huh?" Heat said. "Sounds like we've got all the bases covered."

"We got it at the mining facility," Fielding pointed out. "And you figured it out in that terrifying space station. I have supreme confidence in us. Besides, if intel's right for a change, we should

practically be able to walk into their mostly abandoned base. Show of hands who's betting on that?"
No one moved.
"Yeah, me too." Fielding lifted his finger. "One second, Captain Gabriel's contacting me about our current location."
Heat admired his HUD, ensuring everything was online and ready to go. They were sending three shuttles just in case something happened. Combined with the four heading down from the Pahxin, they were guaranteed to have a ride back for the Orbs. *Yeah, but this is the wrong objective*.
When they left Sol, Heat commented to Fielding that they should be looking for the leader of the Tol'An and taking him out. The Orbs should've been a secondary objective. Command disagreed, stating they were too dangerous to leave in the wild. Even if the Tol'An elite got away, it didn't matter so long as they brought the devices with them home.
If they feel cornered, they might detonate them. Heat wondered if the terrorists knew how to weaponize the Orbs. He somehow doubted it but they had used them to forge some interesting trinkets. The engineering teams had a field day with their gadgets and computer equipment. Nothing too fancy, but it filled in some blanks about the enemy.
"Okay," Fielding said. "We're launching now. Opposition out there is light. We'll have a straight shot to the planet. Four ships escorting us. Now's the time, guys. Get ready to kick some ass!"
Heat's private com went off. He accepted the incoming call, setting his helmet to privacy mode. It masked his voice so that no one could hear it outside of his com. "Hello?" He said while tapping his leg.
"It's Cassie. I wanted to talk to you just before you left."
"Too late," Heat replied. "We're on our way right now."
"I meant before you go to the surface, you maniac. I've got the coordinates of the Orbs. I'm sending them to your whole unit. Looks pretty good for your run. There's a battleship but the captain assures me it was severely damaged before it fled Earth. Three destroyers are also here. They really did commit everything to the attack."

“Bad for them.” Heat smirked. “Good for us. Should be a piece of cake. Got any idea how many soldiers we’re facing?”
“I’m afraid not. Salina’s doing a full system sweep, trying to find anything out of the ordinary. I’ll keep you informed as I can. Hey …” Cassie lowered her voice. “Try to be really careful when you get down there, okay? Those Orbs … with two of them right next to each other, you might be impacted by them. They *could* reach out.”
“I don’t want to end up like Gil,” Heat said. “I really need to learn how to ignore these damn things. You know … block them from hopping into my head.”
“I’m working on a way,” Cassie said, “but it’s slow going. Hopefully, Gil’s awake when we get back. He might have some ideas. And Thayne’s definitely working on it. He and Harper have a bunch of theories but unfortunately, those aren’t helping us any. Not you and I, especially.”
“How bad was that last contact you had?”
“Bad. I thought it was fifteen minutes and it turned out to be several hours. Those things are no joke and all six of them together … it makes me *very* nervous.”
“Probably not a good idea to have them all in the same room.” Heat sighed. “Not my call though. Hey, we’re on approach now. I’m going to get off the line … put my game face on, you know the drill.”
“Good luck. We’ll be in touch soon.”
“Thanks.” Heat killed the line and turned to glance out the window. They were on rapid approach to the planet. The Stalwart already jumped the destroyers, laying into them with a shocking display of firepower. Energy blasts battered the smaller ship which tried to maneuver away.
It didn’t matter. A moment later, the hull ruptured and it began to list, drifting off as the reactor exploded. Two chunks began to float apart, electric pulses dancing along the damaged sections. Heat shook his head. *Those Pahxin guys are tough. They’ve got some fantastic weapons. I do* not *look forward to ever having a brawl with them.*
“Six minutes,” Fielding shouted. “This is what we trained for, folks! Hold on to something ‘cause this might be rough!”

Probably not, Heat thought. *We'll probably barely notice other than some turbulence and a little shaking. Otherwise, this will be a routine mission. We'll get in, we'll leave and even though the results will be felt across the galaxy, we'll think of it like any other mission. In fact, we'll have to be convinced otherwise.*

Strange world we live in. Heat checked his weapon then put his game face on. He was ready.

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Chapter 9

Gizan and Rythi nearly made it to the planet when Trall's ship returned alone. It was badly damaged, scans indicating system failure throughout the ship and limited defenses. It limped back toward the planet, a slow run that would take them the better part of five hours, plenty of time for the small passenger ship to make its run.

They arrived at the edge of the planet twenty minutes ahead of the larger ship. Maintaining their camouflage meant they couldn't move at full speed but it didn't matter. Gizan knew he'd be in position long before Trall had a chance to report back whatever bad news he carried. Likely that he lost the entire fleet.

Rythi took them into the atmosphere on the far side of the planet where night blanketed the continent. As they plunged toward the surface, the captain didn't engage the thrusters until they were only five thousand feet above the ground. Leveling out, he kept them low, practically skimming trees as they made their way toward the base.

Thirty minutes into the trip, they had almost arrived at their destination. Gizan pumped himself up for what was to come, meditating on what it would take to get into the base to find Ezria. More importantly, he needed to consider the sheer number of men he might face and how he planned to dispatch them all.

Stealth was the only option but he also needed to be quick. It would be a challenge, but he knew he was up to it.

Rythi drew him out of his personal meditation with a sigh and a clicking of his tongue.

"What's the matter?" Gizan asked. "What is it?"

"Two ships just jumped into the sector," Rythi replied. "And they must've had a crack navigator because they're practically right on top of the planet." He hummed. "Do you recognize either of these vessels? One's a Pahxin battleship, that's for sure but I've never seen the other one before. Some kind of experimental craft?"

Gizan looked at the screen and groaned inwardly. "That is a human ship," he muttered. "The Gnosis."

“You know it then. Is it dangerous?”
“Terribly but I shouldn’t be surprised that they came right after Trall. That fool. I wonder if he led them back here or if they figured out how to make the Orbs show them where we were. Well, they complicate matters … and make it so I have to move even swifter.”
“Can you still do it?” Rythi turned to him. “Gizan, I know that you feel like you’ve got to do this, but I’d be remiss in saying … once we got over the whole holding a knife up to me thing, I’ve come to respect you some. I’d rather not see you throw your life away unnecessarily. Seriously.”
“What do you propose?”
“I can get us out of here right now,” Rythi gestured to the controls. “We can be out of this system in the next half hour. Let these people kill each other. You don’t have to be part of their nonsense anymore. Especially now that the Pahxin have arrived to take care of the Tol’An. What’s the point of getting in their way?”
Gizan considered his comments for a long moment. The fact he expressed any sort of companionship shocked him. Perhaps he made a valid point. Once the Tol’An were gone, no one would be pursuing him, not effectively. And all he had to do was tell the captain to pull up, depart the planet.
“How will you get paid?” Gizan asked. “The wealth I promised you is in that base.”
“One thing you learn when you take to spacing,” Rythi said. “There’s always a way to make money.”
“Fascinating thought.” Gizan rubbed his eyes. “No, we have to finish this. I need to be the one to take care of Ezria and if that means I face the humans again … face Pahxin soldiers, then so be it. If for some reason they capture you, I’ll tell them I forced you to come here. You’ll be exonerated.”
“I won’t be caught,” Rythi said. “I’m not as comfortable with you getting away.”
“It might not be my destiny to escape.” Gizan gestured to the screen. “That’s where we’re landing.”
“Yeah …” Rythi brought them in by a grove of trees, setting the ship

down with all the finesse of a surgeon. He turned to Gizan. “I wish you luck. Don’t do anything foolish. If you don’t think you can make it happen, come back. I’m telling you. We can make a life somewhere else for you. It doesn’t have to be after you kill someone.”
“I do appreciate it.” Gizan gripped his shoulder for a moment. “Drop the hatch. I’ve got a bit of a run ahead of me.” The loading ramp dropped, slapping the ground hard. Gizan jogged off the ship and turned sharply, heading for the base he’d spent the majority of the past three years.
This would be the last time he ever saw it. One way or another, he’d never look upon it again.

***

Ulian leaned forward as the Stalwart left hyperspace. The screen flickered on a moment later, revealing three destroyers and Trall’s ship, sidling up to an old space station. Records indicated the system hadn’t been visited in over a hundred years. Any facilities they utilized were either ancient or put into service by the Tol’An.
None of this looks particularly new. Ulian scowled at their opposition. *Especially those ships. They appear to be military vessels. Probably stolen ships that Trall helped them acquire somehow.* The thought boiled his blood but he maintained his composure, keeping his tone even as he spoke.
“Engage.” Ulian leaned back. “Erda, fire at will. I want those destroyers gone. Get a scan of the surface and scramble our shuttles. I want the humans to have all the backup they need. I believe we can make short work of this force and wrap this up prior to the fleet’s arrival. Make it happen.”
Erda pushed them to full speed, adjusting course to take them directly to their targets. Their coordinates proved solid enough that they closed within firing range within twenty minutes. During that time, the smaller ships moved to meet them, preparing for a fight. Tactical showed them powering up shields and weapons.
They’re insane, Ulian thought. *They can’t possibly think they can beat us*.

He turned to Morala. “If they’re willing to throw their lives away at us, it’s because they’re trying to buy time for something else. Are those shuttles going?”
“Yes, sir,” Morala answered. “They’re on their way. Humans hopped in right after us and made straight for the planet. They’re depositing their marines with air coverage. Soldiers will have boots on the ground within twenty minutes if they hurry as much as I’m sure they will. The Gnosis should be able to join us shortly to finish off Trall.”
“We can hold them off until then.” Ulian paused as Erda fired the weapons, blasting the first destroyer. The ship veered hard to starboard, an attempt to evade but too many of the blasts struck them center mass. Shields ruptured but it took a second pass of weapons to cut them in half, blowing them into two chunks. “As expected. The other two?”
“They’re moving to flank us,” Erda said. “I can broadside them both.”
“Trall is hailing us,” Viran said. “I have him on the line if you’d like to talk to him.”
Ulian considered ignoring the man but he ultimately couldn’t do it. “Erda, do not let up on those destroyers.” He hummed. “I suppose we can hear him snivel. What do you say, Morala?”
“Of course, sir.”
“Put him on the screen.”
Trall’s face appeared, this time wearing a fearful expression. “Ulian …” He swallowed hard after his voice broke. “Sir. You cannot do this. You cannot destroy everything we’ve worked so hard to build.”
“Are you appealing to me to allow known terrorists to flourish?” Ulian asked. “Because if so, I’m inclined to think you have become funny. Though I doubt that could be true considering how you’re sweating.” He rubbed his chin. “Intriguing that you would even think to contact me with such a complaint.”
“How dare you—”
“How dare *you*!” Ulian interrupted with a shout, startling his bridge crew. “You betrayed your people for this! You refused to surrender when given a chance. You’ve thrown away everything you vowed to protect. I have no time for games or conversation. This is the end for

you, Trall. You have two choices: accept it like a man or snivel like a child."
"But we can work something out!"
"I'm done." Ulian waved his hand at Viran who killed the line. The ship trembled from an attack. "The destroyers I take it?"
"Yes, sir. They're hitting us with missiles. Shields are at eighty percent. They'll have a hard time punching through."
"Sir …" Viran sighed. "Trall is … well … it looks like he's going to ram us."
Ulian slapped his forehead. "That fool headed idiot!" He scowled. "How long before he gets here?"
"Five minutes."
"Can we launch bombers in that time, Morala?"
"I can get them up in two … I'm not sure if they'd be effective at taking him down in time. It would be better to use the missile launchers and put the warheads on those. They're not as maneuverable from weight but it shouldn't matter if he's going in a straight line."
"The weapon crews can do it in time?"
"I'll be sure they do." Morala got on the com and started barking orders.
"Viran, inform the Gnosis what this idiot is planning and tell them we need all the firepower they can muster brought to bear." Ulian turned to Erda. "If worse comes to worst, you can get us out of his way, right?"
"It won't be fun for the crew but I can." Erda hummed. "I'm calculating an escape vector right now. It might be close though, considering how little warning we got about it. Can I just say this guy really annoys me, sir?"
"You're mirroring my thoughts." Ulian stood. "Now this comes down to whether or not we can load a gun fast enough to destroy a madman. Down to the alacrity of our people in the hold. This is where we see whether drills pay off or are completely worthless. Training versus desperation. May the best ship win."

***

Vincent confirmed their ships were launched. He was about to inform Desmond when Salina cursed. “Sir,” she said, “the Stalwart just reported that the Tol’An battleship is on a collision course with them. Estimated Time to Impact is less than five minutes. They’ve asked we bring all firepower to bear on that ship.”
“Get us over there, Zach,” Desmond said. “As fast as you can.”
“I’m on it.” Zach tapped his controls and the ship started moving, veering to the left. “ETA less than two minutes.”
“Lord, this is a close one.” Vincent clenched his fist. “What is with these guys and their suicide attacks? Do they not realize dying is not winning?”
“They know their time is done,” Desmond replied. “This is how they give up. Not by surrendering to live out their lives in a prison or be executed but going out on their own terms. It’s disturbing but that’s the zealous mind.” He turned to Cassie. “Are our people going to be able to find the Orbs easily enough?”
“I have their coordinates and I sent them to each of the marines,” Cassie replied. “They have what they need. Now it’s just a matter of dealing with however many enemies are still down there.”
“Do we have an accurate count yet?” Desmond asked.
“Negative,” Salina said. “The Orbs are interfering with surface scans. I can tell you there are people but not how many. Wait.” She cleared her throat. “Cassie, look at this. This interference is coming from outside the base. About a mile away. Do you see that? Some kind of object is causing it.”
Vincent watched Cassie take a look. She returned to her seat and tapped at her console. “Size and silhouette suggest a ship,” she said. “Do you see?”
“Is it a ship or some kind of jamming beacon they set up?”
“Definitely a ship.”
“But it’s emitting a signal that makes this appear natural. Clever … but annoying.” Salina shrugged. “I don’t see how to get around it. It’s almost like this thing is compensating for everything I try. Wouldn’t

you think that would be suspicious? I mean, come on!"
Cassie shrugged. "The casual observer might just think they weren't good enough to get around the natural emanations of the planet. We know what we're doing. I'm not sure it ultimately matters. There can't be enough people down there to make a difference. Not considering how many soldiers are on their way."
"We'll get a scan from the fighters," Vincent said. "I'm sure proximity will play into it." He looked at his screen. "Our shuttles are half way down. Meeting no resistance so far."
"That's what I thought," Desmond replied. "We already took out most of what they have. Zach, are we in firing range?"
"Thirty seconds."
"Push it. They ram the Stalwart and that should be enough to finish the fight there." Desmond leaned forward. "I'd rather not be in the midst of a rescue operation when the rest of the fleet arrives."

***

Gizan moved swiftly through the trees, an environment he'd become intimately familiar with over the past several years. He trained out there alone, running and performing martial arts forms he'd learned in his youth. Few knew just how much time he spent in the wild and fewer still knew all the secrets of the Tol'An as he did.
The inlet to the sea was far to the north. Ezria's personal chambers overlooked it. That's where the man would likely be, lost in a delusion, blinded by the belief that he would survive this final attack. He probably thought some fleet was coming to save him, the remnants of what he sent against Earth.
That was not to be. Gizan saw Trall's ship and it was in shambles. It had taken a pounding and probably shouldn't have even survived the trip back. The fact it did was a miracle but now that the human ship arrived along with their allies, they'd finish what they started back on Earth.
I hope they don't bombard the base before I finish my work. Gizan didn't know how far the Pahxin would go to eliminate the Tol'An threat but

he knew how they were considered in the top five largest threats to the government. That was a wise decision when they were clever, but they'd probably been dramatically demoted.

Or maybe not. The Pahxin like to see things through.

The outer doors came into view, the side entrance he often used to exit the base. No one stood guard, as he hoped. Darting from the trees, he made his way to the door and entered the old code. The door slid open. *The fools! They haven't changed the security? Trall should've known better than that even if Ezria did not.*

But who would think that Gizan was coming back? He'd fled, left his responsibilities behind and seemed to be gone. Only the fact that Ezria sent people after him made him decide to strike back and buy his freedom with this last, personal mission. Still, he thought he instilled some honest paranoia in them.

Maybe they have bigger fish to fry. Gizan paused before entering, turning to see shuttles fast approaching. Human and Pahxin soldiers, racing down to collect the Trindishas he assumed. If he wanted to survive, he needed to slip in, perform his deed and get back to Rythi. If the man was as good as he said, he could get them out of there unseen.

Gizan slipped into the base, moving down the familiar corridors. Men shouted up ahead, the remaining defensive force getting into position to hold back the invaders. He wished he had his uniform still. He might've melded amongst them, slipping by unnoticed. As it was, he remained in the shadows, giving them a moment to get outside.

You fools should remain inside, Gizan thought. *Make them come to you. Blast them when they attempt to enter. Instead, you'll be obliterated as soon as they get out of their ships. And that's if they don't bombard the place prior to deploying their soldiers. The Tol'An needed better leaders … men with experience.*

Gizan watched the staging area where the men poured out of two double doors. All but two charged outside, making their way for defensive positions. Those who lingered displayed something that would've gotten them shot if their commander saw it: fear. They didn't want to risk their lives fighting the enemy outside.

I don't blame you, Gizan thought. *But I have to get by.* The room was large but not so big that they wouldn't notice his passage. He sprinted toward them, both knives drawn. They turned at the last possible second, opening their mouths to cry out. He plunged his weapons into their throats, taking them both to the ground with his momentum. They flailed, one managing to grab Gizan's wrist before expiring. The others outside had no idea, didn't look back. Two men died from cowardice, a truth which spoke of the decline of the organization as a whole. If they could sense the decline, if their zeal lifted, then the Tol'An were in the midst of similar death throes.

Gizan grabbed one of their weapons and slung it over his shoulder. He dragged them to the side, out of casual view then ran down the hall again. Passing through the operational area, he saw men working through windows into the other rooms. They were organizing the defense efforts but none of them looked around.

Next, he'd enter the living quarters before approaching Ezria's lair. The walls trembled as the assault commenced. *Those attacks must be hitting the ground. If they were battering the building, it would feel like world ending seismic activity. No, they're hitting those idiot soldiers outside. There must be more in here somewhere. Possibly guarding their master. It will not be enough.*

***

Ulian did his best to maintain his reserve but inside, he seethed. The fact that Trall would conduct himself with such a blatant dishonor came off as reprehensibly desperate. The rogue captain had so many options, even running away would've been better. But instead, he charged, giving up all sense of propriety in the process.

The final two destroyers laid into them, though Ulian wasn't sure why. If Trall was successful, they wouldn't have to bother. They should've turned their attention to the Gnosis, which took position on the enemy's starboard flank. Would they be able to handle the two smaller ships with the Stalwart gone?

"Target's in range," Erda said. "Opening fire."

Their weapons discharged, piercing the hull of the enemy vessel and tearing through their weakened shields. Pieces flew clear but the mainstay of the ship remained intact. They didn't need much for a ram to be effective. If they were able to hit them with reasonable momentum, both vessels would be disabled at best or worst, utterly destroyed.

The Gnosis let loose as well, battering at the enemy with a full barrage. Their attack brought about similar results, ripping panels free and exposing several decks. Ulian calculated the loss of life, how many people aboard were being slaughtered because of Trall's vanity. Regardless of how the situation turned out, all of them would die.

"We're ready with the bombs," Morala announced. "Firing now."

The ordnance streaked away from the ship, leaving behind gray particles. They detonated on impact, cutting large chunks from the vessel. Erda hit the thrusters, carrying them upward fast enough that the artificial gravity and inertial dampeners could not keep up. Ulian grunted from the force as they moved.

He had to do it at the right moment or Trall's people could've adjusted course, maintaining enough momentum to still cause considerable damage. But even with the dramatic maneuver, the enemy battleship attempted to chase them. Flames erupted from seams spread over the craft like throbbing orange veins.

Blow already! Ulian willed their reactor to detonate, to finish them off. He checked his screen. They were less than five thousand kilometers away. Destruction at that range would still cause some damage, the larger pieces in particular. Erda seemed to know that. He hadn't let up on the thrusters.

"Can we fire?" Ulian shouted to fight the pressure making it difficult to breathe. "And why didn't those bombs finish him off?"

"I'm working on it!" Erda said.

"They pretty much worked!" Viran called back. "All their systems are offline. They're basically a projectile heading straight for the planet's surface! They can't maneuver and we're out of their path so can we please slow down now before I vomit? I'd really appreciate it."

"Do it!" Ulian ordered. Erda initiated the top thrusters to slow them

down, allowing all systems to catch up. Something whined deep within the ship, the sound of the dampeners settling back to normal operation. Once the pressure alleviated, it became easier to breathe and sit up straight.

“Why is it holding together?” Morala asked. “You can see the breaks throughout the ship. It should be in pieces.”

“Oh my …” Viran sighed. “Quite clever. They’ve rigged their shield generators, their reactor, everything has become magnetic. The whole ship is held together by it. That’s why it’s still in one piece despite the bombs. The crew must’ve done it when they decided to ram us. They knew we’d hit them with everything we had.”

Ulian’s shoulders ached but he ignored the pain, staring at the screen. “Where’s that thing going to crash down?”

“Calculating,” Viran said. “The northern continent, roughly six thousand kilometers away from the base.” Pretty far.”

“Damage potential?” Morala asked.

Viran whistled. “Catastrophic. The reactor hasn’t gone off yet. If it does within the atmosphere, it would be like dropping dirty bombs to the order of … six in one spot. Though the destruction would be immediate with only minor lingering side effects. Easily cleaned up by an environmental team.”

“Time to impact?” Ulian asked.

“Twenty-five minutes at the current speed.”

The ship shook again from another attack by the destroyers. “Those annoying gnats,” Morala muttered. “Erda, target those bastards and light them up.”

Ulian leaned close to her, lowering his voice, “do you think we should try to annihilate that ship? Prevent it from hitting the planet?”

“I suppose that depends on whether it’s possible to do so,” Morala said. “Considering what Viran described, we might knock some pieces off but we practically need to ram into them to divert their course. Besides, how bad can the impact be? A few tremors? Nothing that should prevent the ground troops from finishing their mission.”

“Shuttle traffic may be impossible,” Viran said. “Sorry to eavesdrop … but the immediate effects will involve a dramatic, natural response.

Basically, horrible storms."
"Ah." Morala cleared her throat. "We can try, but our bombs didn't do the trick. We could chase the thing over there … let the Gnosis deal with the destroyers."
"Get me Captain Bradford," Ulian said. "I'll pose the question to him."

***

Desmond held his seat as Zach brought them in for their attack run on Trall's ship, watching the screen intently as they unleashed everything they had on the ship. It caused considerable damage but not enough to bring it down. That was to be expected. They charged up for a second go when the Stalwart peppered the enemy with missiles.
The projectiles caused such a flash when they hit, Desmond felt dazzled. He rubbed his eyes, squinting to see what had happened. Orange lines decorated the surface, fire bulging the hull. The Stalwart popped upward, a dramatic and swift motion that took them well above Trall's ship as it sailed by.
"That thing is done," Salina said. "All systems are down."
"Why's it not blowing up then?" Vincent asked.
"Some kind of magnetic pull at the center is holding the ship together," Salina replied. "Something extremely powerful but they are effectively dead. It's a big ballistic missile at this point."
"Captain!" Zach pointed. "Incoming enemy destroyer."
"Lock on and open fire," Desmond said. "Evasive maneuvers."
The ship darted again, this time tossing Desmond left in his seat. He grunted from the suddenness of the motion, clinging hard to his arm rests. Their weapons fired, half striking their target. Before the enemy could shoot at them, Zach initiated their primary thrusters. They darted away from their former position, moving into a new firing solution.
"Stalwart on the line," Salina said.
"Send it over here." Desmond gestured to his station. "Ulian, what's going on?"
"Trall's ship is dead," Ulian replied, "but it can still cause a lot of

trouble. We've plotted its course. It will crash on the planet's surface. The damage will be catastrophic, including a storm which may delay departure for some time … possibly worse."
"We're reading some kind of magnetics. What do you propose we do to stop it?"
"We have twenty-five minutes to hit it with everything we've got, to knock pieces off at the very least to minimize the damage to the planet." Ulian shrugged. "I think that's the only choice at this point."
"What is up with these maniacs and their attempts to crash into planets?" Desmond grumbled. "I say we finish these destroyers then focus everything on the battleship. Agreed?"
Ulian nodded. "Indeed. You've got yours, we'll finish the other one. Ulian out."
"Keep hitting them, Zach," Desmond said. "Once again, we're on a crazy timeline. This one might not be as bad as back home but I'd rather not have a whole lot of people stranded down there for any longer than they have to be."

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Chapter 10

Heat disembarked the shuttle, following Fielding and Dashwood as they burst onto the field. Once they cleared their ship, each of them initiated their jump packs, carrying them a few hundred yards from their landing zone. As they landed amongst the rocks nearby, enemy fire chased them, energy beams splashing against rocks and winking into the sky.

The shuttles performed a quick pass over the area, bombarding the heaviest resistance. Heat saw pieces of enemies scattered about the area, arms and legs tossed from the impact points. As he came down in his cover, he darted to the edge of the massive boulder, using his HUD to get a zoomed view of their destination.

Double doors were wide open, offering easy access to the base. Cassie's data showed the Orbs were in there, somewhere off to the left. He had a waypoint to follow to get there, though the exact path would likely be complicated by hallways. The facility itself was not as large as he anticipated but according to scans, there were other structures nearby.

Other barracks for the men we killed back on Earth. Heat took aim and fired at one of the half walls the enemy used for cover. His attack struck the surface, proving it was sturdy enough not to move from a quick hit. He initiated his jump pack, launching himself high enough to see over it.

One soldier crouched there, practically cowering. He peppered him with multiple shots, tearing through his personal shield and ending him a moment later. *Shit, where were those shields on Earth? They didn't have them! These guys must've exhausted their resources, depleted their supplies.*

Heat landed and charged for the door. "I'm going in," he spoke over the com. "Gillet, you with me?"

"A little busy!" Gillet shouted.

Heat looked around, saw heavier enemy resistance on the opposite side of his position. He redirected, laying into the cluster of Tol'An

soldiers from behind. He counted six total men and he took down three in a second. One spun and fired back, a clean miss. He was rewarded with a blow from behind right in the head.
Another group charged out from beside the building, causing Heat to hit his jump pack again. Their combined attack caught the ground where he'd been standing a moment before. He landed on the roof, dropping low to avoid additional fire.
Rockets exploded. Weapons fire filled the air. The Pahxin soldiers came upon them, slicing through the enemy ranks. Heat peeked over the side and noted he had a clean line of sight to the base. "We've got to get in there!" He shouted. "We can secure the Orbs while they take care of the rest!"
"Where is everyone?" Fielding asked. He landed near the door and Heat joined him. "That's one. Dashwood? Where are you?"
"We're engaged," Dashwood said. "The Rat and I are a little busy." Gillet joined them at the door.
"Okay, help the Pahxin," Fielding said. "We're going in. Wish us luck." He waved for the others to follow him. "I'm on point. Let's go."
Heat followed the lieutenant into the facility, pausing immediately as something to the right caught his eye. "Sir," he said. "Hold on." He moved over and found two bodies lying on the ground, ghastly wounds decorating their throats. "None of us did this. Someone knifed these two."
"Creepy," Fielding said. "I'm guessing someone turned on them."
"Then hid the bodies?" Heat asked. "Something about this doesn't feel right."
"We don't have time to worry about it now." Fielding patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, we have to move. I've got the waypoint. Follow me."
Heat cast a lingering glance at the bodies before complying. He didn't like the look of it but if there was a knife wielding maniac running around, at least it wouldn't matter to them. The guy wasn't about to pierce the power armor with an edged weapon. That didn't mean he couldn't cause some other kind of trouble.
Like detonating the Orbs.

***

Gizan passed through the living quarters, moving slower. A man burst around the corner, a technician carrying a gun. They made eye contact for a brief moment before the newcomer bowed his head in deference. The barrel of his weapon dropped toward the floor as he did.

“My Lord, you’ve come back. Thank all that is holy.”

“Yes.” Gizan continued walking. “I’m here to make it all right.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad.” Gizan lashed out, slicing the man’s throat. The tech’s eyes went wide as he dropped his weapon, grasping at the wound. Dropping to the floor, he gurgled out his final moments. “But only for a certain few.”

The Trindishas were not far off, just a room away. He approached Ezria’s chamber, paused to look at where the devices were held. Such an inordinate amount of power there. He shook his head. The Tol’An were not mature enough to wield such wonders. They didn’t deserve what they had.

Gizan tapped the panel, stepping into the large, mostly empty room overlooking the sea. The lights were out, only the sunlight illuminated the dim space. He’d been there several times. Taken missions from the man who called himself a master. The rest chambers were to the left beside the washroom.

“Come out!” Gizan shouted. “Do not make me come hunting you down like a terrified animal. I think we’ve all sacrificed enough honor for cowardice.”

Ezria stepped into the room from the rest chambers, carrying a knife. He was naked from the waist up, scars decorating his muscular body. Black, loose fitting trousers ended in bare feet. His eyes carried a glint of madness as he stepped forward, smiling with a chilling, rictus grin.

“I’ve been hunting you,” Ezria said. “Across the stars.”

“Yes, well. Here I am.” Gizan tilted his head. He tossed the rifle aside. “Do you think you can stand against me with a blade?”

“I intend to try,” Ezria replied. “Before I followed Calatha, I fought in

the slave pits of Alava Nine. Illegal … possibly run by the Kalrawv Group but who could prove it?" He shook his head. "I can fight, Gizan. I just had tools to do the work for me. Such as you. My finest weapon … dulled and eventually turned on me."
"Perhaps if you hadn't imprisoned me for a single failure, things would've been different."
"You think I should've been easy on you?"
"Military operations are not guarantees and people deserve second chances."
"That is where you are wrong. You've proven that. Once failure takes hold, a soul is lost forever."
"Enough of this!" Gizan spit on the floor. "You ruined the ideals of the Tol'An. You tread upon the honor of Calatha and you have betrayed the very reason this organization was formed. I am ending your life right now. Today, your incompetent reign ends and with it, the organization you corrupted."
Gizan dashed forward, wielding his knives backward in his hands. He swiped at Ezria's face but the man faded away, dancing as a flurry of blows nearly gutted him. But the former master remained unscathed, bouncing on the balls of his feet.
Initiating another swift array of attacks, Gizan put everything he had into the assault. Ezria once again evaded them, keeping just out of range. His agility shocked the assassin, especially considering he'd never seen him perform such moves before.
Who trained this man? Gizan thought. *He's far better than I would've given him credit for!*
Just as Gizan decided to commit to another attack, Ezria hopped forward, landing a thrust kick to Gizan's stomach. The blow shocked him, knocking him backward and forcing him to take a knee. The wind rushed from his lungs and he fought to breathe. Holding his weapon up defensively, he fought to recover.
Ezria advanced again, throwing a kick for Gizan's face. The assassin rolled out of the way, swiping his knife as he did. He felt it find resistance and pass through, slicing through Ezria's pants and cutting him just above the knee.

The man hissed in response then threw himself at Gizan, attacking like a feral animal. They blocked and struck, advanced and fell back. Each cut the other, superficial wounds on the forearms and hands. Something stung just below Gizan's left eye as hot blood covered his cheek. He lashed out with a kick, connecting with Ezria's groin.
They both fell out of range, panting and gasping. "You are good," Ezria said. "You have definitely not lost your edge."
"None of this matters," Gizan said. "The humans are here. The Pahxin. They'll execute you even if I do not."
"And they will martyr me!"
"No one cares about you enough to find your death particularly compelling." Gizan attacked again, launching himself at Ezria. He led held one knife back while leading with the other. Ezria stood at the last second, allowing the leading blade to sink into his shoulder. They both fell to the ground.
Gizan gasped as terrible pain rushed through his midsection. He plunged his free weapon into the side of Ezria's neck, making the man's eyes go wide and mouth pop open. He sawed twice until he felt bone, blood spraying from a severed artery. Nothing would save Ezria after that.
"It's over now." Gizan tried to rise but the pain in his stomach made it difficult. He looked down. The handle of Ezria's weapon stuck out of him, the blade deep in his midsection. Moving caused so much agony, he nearly fell unconscious. He stumbled to the wall, leaning against it. Ezria sputtered and hissed, pressing at his wound. He began to convulse, legs kicking feebly before he finally went still. His last breath came as a wheeze, signaling not only his end but that of the Tol'An as an effective force. The ones fighting above didn't know they were done, but it was just a matter of time.
Heavy footfalls sounded from down the way, the familiar sound of human power armor. Gizan couldn't help but smile. To have found success only to be killed by a lesser race, one that barely learned how to travel the stars … it struck him as humorous. And perhaps a little unfair.
"Gizan!" Rythi's voice exploded over his com. "Come in!"

“I’m here,” Gizan muttered. Anything louder hurt too much. “What is it?”
“Something’s going to crash on the planet! Something really big! We have minutes … eighteen to twenty at the most! We have to get out of here!”
“You go,” Gizan replied. “I’m sorry that I could not reward you for your efforts. You deserved to get something for this.”
“I’m not leaving without you!”
“I do not believe I will survive for much longer,” Gizan said. “I’ve completed the task but the enemy approaches … and I’ve been terribly wounded. Save yourself … friend. I’m … done.”
Rythi was silent for several moments. “I’m sorry. I know you wanted to have a normal life in the end. Rest well … wherever you end up.”
“You as well.” Gizan turned off the com and slumped to the ground. He stared out the window. He couldn’t see the waves from his vantage point but the horizon was clearly visible. He smiled at the view. It would look quite different after whatever hit the planet that worried Rythi but he doubted he’d be alive to see it.
Just as well, Gizan thought. *I’ve done what I set out to do. I’ve atoned. I deserve nothing more than this death. Die as one lives … that … has always been … the way*. He swallowed hard. Most of his body went numb. Blood soaked his pants. He forced himself to remain awake, to stare at the water. If he could choose his final sight, it would be that.

***

“Right down here!” Fielding shouted. He stopped dead in his tracks. Gillet ran into him. “Slow down guys. Look at this body.”
Heat stepped forward. Another man had his throat cut. “This is the work of someone who really did turn on them. Jesus.”
“Hold on.” Fielding pressed his hand against his helmet. He paced away. “Shit, guys. I just got word that battleship might hit the planet. The Gnosis and Stalwart are trying to blow it up but they might not pull it off. We have to secure the payloads and get them out of here immediately.”

They hustled down the hall, pausing at the final two doors. “It’s one of these,” Fielding said. “Gillet, you and Heat grab that one on the left. I’ll do the right.”

Heat tapped the panel and stepped inside. His eyes fell on a body lying in a pool of blood, hands pressed at a gaping wound on the throat. It was naked from the waist up, covered in gore and scars. *Who the hell is that guy?* He wondered. *He can’t be the leader of the Tol’An … can he?*

“Look,” Gillet said. “Remember this guy?”

Heat turned and gazed down at another man, barely breathing. A knife stuck out of his gut, tiny cuts marred his face and arms. He looked terrible. “Holy shit. Yeah. He attacked Cassie that time. He was wanted by the Pahxin big time. So he turned on the Tol’An, huh?” He initiated the speaker to talk outside the suit. “You still alive?”

“For the present.” The man rasped. He didn’t take his eyes off the window.

“Who was that you killed?”

“Ezria Tolva … farcical ruler of the Tol’An.”

“I was right,” Heat muttered. “I thought as much. Why’d you kill him?”

“He was a fool … a traitor to the cause … a monster.”

“Like you were much better,” Gillet said.

“And I am suffering for it.”

Heat nodded. “Probably true.”

“Think we could save him?” Gillet asked.

Heat huffed. “What for? To be executed? Let him bleed out here.” He knelt beside him. “You caused a lot of pain and suffering. You were there when you kidnapped our ambassador and you tried to destroy society.” He gripped the knife. “I hope it’s hot wherever you end up.” He yanked the blade free, drawing a gurgled cry from the man. Blood gushed from the wound. The Tol’An man breathed heavily several times before sliding down to his side. He died a moment later.

Heat dropped the knife on his body. “Come on. Fielding probably has the Orbs. And whatever this was … it’s over. This lot got what they deserved in a major way. Justice was swift for once … and bloody.”

***

Cassie stared at her screen, tapping her foot as she waited for a report. The marines were in position, they'd entered the building. It wasn't that large. The Tol'An seemed to spread out, turning the area into a small town for lodging and storage. The main complex housed a nominal defense, but it was falling rapidly.

Salina let them know that the battleship was on the way. They tried to hurry but there was only so much they could do. Of course, they knew exactly where to go. The only obstacles to gathering the devices might've been additional soldiers within the facility but she had a feeling they would commit all their defenses to repel the invading force.

Fielding reached out to her a few minutes later. "We've secured the Orbs," he said. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Heat found a dead guy that you might remember. Some freak who attacked you at the mining facility?"

"Oh my … did you guys kill him?"

"Looks like some internal shit," Fielding said. "Pardon my language. He fought with what he claimed was the leader of the Tol'An. They're both dead. I informed the Pahxin. They'll probably come in to collect the bodies. Apparently, both of them are wanted. Anyway, we're coming out with the devices now. How much time before impact?"

Cassie leaned to look at Salina's screen. "Twelve minutes. The Stalwart made short work of the destroyers … still not sure what they were hoping to accomplish. The Tol'An was done. They could've made this easy on everyone."

"Not exactly the way of terrorists, ma'am," Fielding said. "We'll be back soon. Fielding out."

"They have the Orbs!" Cassie shouted. "They're bringing them out now!"

"Wonderful," Desmond said. "Now if we can destroy this battleship before it crashes into the planet, we might make for an easy trip back up to orbit for them. Zach, how close are we?"

“I’m firing now. The Stalwart is hitting them as well.”
Salina turned. “The goal is to knock as many parts off as possible so that it doesn’t go down whole.”
“I got that,” Zach grumbled. “But every time I hit it, the thing just has more holes. Small chunks get dislodged but the larger ones … it’s like the whole thing has been turned into a massive magnet. If that’s the case, doesn’t that mean it’ll be impossible to dislodge it completely? We’d have to use cutting lasers to slice through it and that would take time.”
“More than we’ve got,” Desmond replied. “But we have to try. Keep at it.”
Cassie turned to watch the view screen. Both ships brutalized the battleship, tearing large pieces off but not big enough to prevent it from causing serious damage. Her own screen started beeping. She turned back to those scans. The source of the planetary interference was leaving. It lifted off, heading for the opposite side of the planet. *Really! Who the hell are you?* Cassie marked them. “Captain, I’ve got a departing ship from the surface.”
“Don’t have time now,” Desmond said. “We’re a little busy.”
Salina announced, “on that note of not having time, I’m picking up a large hyperspace signature.” She paused. “Oh! The Pahxin fleet! They’re here! They’ve arrived.”
“Zach!” Desmond called. “Come on, get it somewhere good!”
“I’m trying!” Zach fired again, searing off one of the thrusters. It tumbled away from the whole just as the Stalwart lit up the side. Finally, the ship began to break up, cast into far more manageable chunks. Cassie stood, staring at the debris they created. It had been caught by the gravitational pull of the planet—it was definitely going down.
But now, there were *many* pieces. Cassie did some calculations. The damage from many of them wouldn’t be too bad but the largest chunks would devastate the regions they landed in. As they began to streak into the atmosphere, turning into fiery shards, Salina cleared her throat.
“Good news, bad news,” Salina said. “Good: we’re not going to see a

world ending event or anything. The bad: some of those chunks are going to hit hard near the facility now and when they do, it's going to be like someone carpet bombed the area. Estimated time to impact: four minutes."

"Where are they with the Orbs?" Vincent asked. "Are they on the shuttles yet?"

Cassie reached out to Fielding with the news, feeling the urgency as she initiated the contact. She held her breath as the line began to beep …

***

Heat shoved one of the Orbs into the first shuttle, stepping back. Gillet took the other one, hefting it toward their other means off the planet. He leaned against the ship, casting a gaze around the area to see if any other fighting was going on. The Pahxin had rounded up several prisoners, a couple dashed inside to gather the rest.

They'd leave with thirty-five men, some soldiers, others techs and of course the two bodies they were so desperate for. All those got loaded up in one of the shuttles. Chances were good they couldn't occupy the area, especially with the battleship coming down. Heat directed his gaze up, eyes widening.

Streaks of fire seemed to be coming in their direction. He anticipated seeing *something* but that … took him by surprise.

"We've got problems!" Fielding shouted. "Launch! Launch! Get the Orbs out of here!"

The two shuttles throttled up and departed, flying rapidly away from the base. That left one shuttle to get *all* the marines out of there. The Pahxin ships were full and even if they crammed them all together, the final shuttle couldn't carry all of them. Weight restrictions meant at least two, probably three would have to stay behind.

"You guys go," Fielding said. "Get on the shuttle. Dashwood and I will figure it out."

"Begging your pardon," Heat said, "but there's no way I'm letting two lieutenants stick it out down here. Vine, get your ass off that shuttle.

Gillet, come with me."
"What're you doing?" Fielding grabbed his arm. "Those pieces are going to land here soon! You have to go!"
"Get on the shuttle, sir." Heat pointed. "We're going to have to rocket our asses out of here if we want to survive and we don't have time to argue." He turned to the others. "Follow me, I have an idea."
"You're a crazy son of a bitch, Heat!" Fielding nodded to Dashwood and the two men boarded the shuttle. It lifted off a moment later.
Heat gestured for them to follow him as he initiated his jump pack, hurling himself toward the building. He landed on the roof, the other two close behind. The sound of the chunks approaching, a heavy whistling sound started to build. He didn't risk a look, just turned his attention to the water and jumped again.
They sailed through the air, reaching an apex as the first of the chunks slammed into the ground with a deafening impact. Their helmets protected them but shockwave sent them an additional two hundred yards out toward the sea. Heat looked down as the water approached. His legs entered first, causing a tremendous splash as he sank into the depths.
The rest of the chunks pummeled the base, a couple striking the sea some distance off. Heat watched them on his scans as he used his rockets to remain close to the surface. Two minutes of constant barrage shook the area before all of them ended. The biggest pieces would hit farther away to the north.
"You still alive?" Fielding called into the com. "Can you hear me?"
"We're underwater," Gillet said. "Heat led us into the sea."
"Nicely played. We achieved orbit and we'll send someone back for you ASAP. Can you get to the surface?"
"Yeah, why not?" Heat muttered. "It wouldn't be a mission if we weren't in some inconvenient place at the end. We'll see you soon, sir. Thanks for not trying to order me back onto the shuttle."
"I doubt you would've listened."
"That's why I'm thanking you. I've been through too much to have a court martial finish it off."

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Epilogue

"They got them!" Cassie shouted. "The Orbs are on their way back to the Gnosis! Injuries only, no deaths!"
"Thank God." Desmond rubbed his eyes. "The real fight was back home. This … this was a brawl."
"Ulian's on the line," Salina added. "He's congratulating us on the operation. The fleet's incoming to help mop up. With the interference gone, I've found the other pockets of Tol'An. They're all over the southern continent … far enough away from the crashing spaceship to survive."
"Well, the fleet can handle that," Desmond replied. "I think we're going to secure our people and get ready to go home. I think everyone would like to see what happens when you put six orbs in a room. Complete the collection and what happens next?"
I'm not so excited, Cassie thought. She knew the technicians back at the base, the AIA and Doctor Harper, Thayne and the Pahxin all had experiments they wanted to run. None of them sounded fun to her. All she wanted was some time off … and maybe to never see an Orb in person again.
"Why do you think they threw everything at Earth?" Vincent asked. "What was the point?"
"They were relying on allies to help them," Desmond replied. "If the militia would've hit again just at the same time, with that traitor unimpeded, God knows how bad that could've gone. AIA caught him just in time. Who knows how much damage he could've caused? But when they saw that they weren't going to steal the Orbs, they tried to blow them up."
"It seems to me," Salina said, "that maybe they thought we hadn't figured out where their base was. By taking them out, we never would've learned about this place."
"True." Desmond nodded. "And then, they could keep flourishing. The gamble didn't pay off, but I understand it. Their ambush caught us off guard. Men and women weren't in position for the fight. We pulled it

off, but not without some losses. Before we left, I heard some of our smaller ships, the old experimental ones that were refitted? They took heavy casualties."

"Pahxin destroyers were taken out," Cassie said. "And a large number of fighters. One of the battleships also is disabled and will require extensive repair. A Captain … Torqua's ship actually. Over sixty ground forces that weren't in power armor died and we lost civilians too. The numbers weren't tallied before we left."

"So no joke," Desmond said. "Witness history, ladies and gentlemen. The end of a terrorist organization plaguing the galaxy for years. We were a part of that. And now, we can finally look toward peace. Not just for us, but for the colonies and other places these guys hit and assaulted. The people they kidnapped and murdered … all avenged."

"Works for me." Vincent leaned back in his chair. "I'm telling you, I'm exhausted. Think we can avoid a fight for like … two weeks or something? Maybe we can take the slow hyperspace lane back. Buy ourselves a couple days. We can make up a story about bad navigation routes."

"I'm not taking that hit," Zach replied with a chuckle.

"We'll have time for rest now," Desmond said. "And a whole lot of other things as well. Thank you all. Let's secure our people, talk to the fleet and get the hell out of here. Earth's going to want the good news and I'm pretty sure everyone on board would like a chance to celebrate. I know we've *all* earned it."

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Golden Age: Legacy War Book 9

The Tol'An have been defeated. Humanity and the Pahxin look toward the future of peace in the galaxy. The crew of the Gnosis begin their own plans, some for retirement and others for the promise of exploration they began before the terrorist attack thrust them into the universal theater.

But when the six Orbs are brought together, an ancient planet is discovered, one which may be responsible for hundreds of disappearances over the past several decades. This may be where the creators of the wondrous devices have hidden all this time. The trajectory of disappearances shows eventually, inhabited worlds may be in danger.

The Gnosis and Stalwart agree to visit in the name of diplomacy, heading out with the promise of a Pahxin fleet as backup. But as they prepare for departure, there's some speculation that they may be heading into a dangerous trap, one that their collective cleverness may not be enough to make it out alive.

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Prologue

Captain Rythi Cless leaned back in the pilot's seat, staring out the cockpit into open space. Nothingness spread before him, a vast expanse of endless stars and opportunities, most of which were lost to him. Gizan promised him a chance for redemption, to escape his past that forced him to operate on the outskirts of Pahxin society.

But then the assassin never returned. Rythi was forced to flee the planet, depart before the rest of the Pahxin arrived and arrested him. Their human allies went in with a serious mission, trashing the place and killing the guards without too much trouble. A scout captain, even a clever one, couldn't stand up to that type of force.

And so he ran. With no prospects, a limited amount of money left from his previous engagement and nowhere to really go, he sat in hopes he might figure out what to do next. The universe seemed to have it out for him. Despite the fact that Gizan proved to be decent enough to him, their relationship started with a threat and a blade.

What do I do next? Rythi turned to his star chart, contemplating the various civilized sectors he still found himself welcome in. One of the space stations on the edge of the frontier felt like the best option, especially since he didn't know whether the Pahxin scanned him on his way out. *They might be looking for my ship*.

If he visited the station, he figured he'd dive into the galaxy network to see if the authorities put his ship on a public watch list. Most security units in those places didn't care about records providing transients didn't cause trouble. Rythi had no intention of giving anyone grief. He just wanted to get back to the gray life he'd struggled with before working with Gizan.

Rythi checked the docking rate and groaned. They increased it since the last time he visited. The fee wouldn't break him but he needed to find some work fast to offset the expense. He would've liked to perform some maintenance on his vessel before accepting more passengers.

I have so much to do. The weight of his future rested heavily on his

shoulders but he forced himself to rally. *There's no reason to fall into a depression. Move on. That's what you've always done.*

Rythi set about plotting a hyperspace course when something sparked behind him. A warning indicator flashed on the system's screen to his left, indicating one of the thrusters dropped offline. *You have got to be kidding me. The universe really does want to tax me to the fullest*.

He disengaged his safety belt and walked back toward his small engineering section. The ship had space for people to sit throughout a journey but not necessarily live onboard for several days. His own quarters were positioned below the cockpit, a small room with a bed and restroom facilities.

If the thrusters went out in the middle of nowhere, Rythi knew he'd be in serious trouble. Few ships ventured out that far and those that did wouldn't be generous. If they spaced him, he'd be lucky. Slavers sometimes scoured the outskirts, looking for broken down vessels they could scavenge cargo from … live cargo.

A black scorch mark indicated where the spark came from, bright enough to be seen from the front of the ship. He peered at it, cursing the melted wires he saw and busted conduit leading from the different assemblies. *I'm going to have to replace that! I hope I've got the parts on hand*.

Rythi checked the cargo area but it was a total mess. Usually, he kept it in reasonable order. *That fast takeoff must've dislodged my tools … my supplies.* Several containers spilled, casting debris across the floor in piles. Food boxes broke open, casting rations about. *Great, that's another thing I have to replace.*

Another sense of despair fell over Rythi as he began cleaning up. He kept an eye out for the replacement parts he needed as he stuffed things back into their boxes, sealing them up with the tops. He kicked something hard enough to send a shock of pain up through his knee, drawing out a series of curses.

For half a moment, he wanted to jettison the contents of the cargo bay, just toss it all and start over. A couple deep breaths calmed him down and he found some focus. *Okay. It's time to relax. I've got this. Worse things have happened to me in my life. I need to focus and get the*

ship functional again.

Half an hour passed and he found the wiring he needed. Rythi figured he'd have *just* enough to make moderate repairs. That would get him to the space station at the very least where he could take some proper time to get things functional again. As he headed back to the thrusters, the entire ship shook violently, tossing him to the ground. Rythi dropped the tools he was carrying, the wires scattering under one of the passenger seats. His chin bounced on the metal grate, dazing him. He rolled on his back, his mind reeling as to what could've happened. *I'm in the middle of nowhere. There's* nothing *around! How could I have been hit?*

He tilted his head to look at the gear resting against the wall. He'd have to seriously stretch to reach it when he was ready. *But first, I need to make sure I'm not going to be hit again*. Rythi crawled to his feet and stumbled toward the cockpit. *What have I done to deserve this? Seriously, I must've wronged a powerful spirit to have such terrible luck*. Another tremor made him grab a seat to avoid falling again. His heart began to race. *Did I find a meteor shower? In such a short period of time? Impossible!* Still, he ran to the cockpit, bending at the waist to see what was going on outside. At first, the emptiness of space greeted him, more nothingness.

He turned to the scanner when a shadow fell over him, a darkness that made the lights of his console all the brighter. Tilting his head, he gasped at the massive shape flying above him. Scans showed it to be some kind of vessel but he'd never seen anything like it before. The energy readings didn't make sense, didn't follow conventional standards.

What kind of propulsion is that? What sort of power plant? How are they processing so much so quickly? Rythi wondered if the pilots of the vessel even knew he was there. *Should I move and expose myself? Or flee?* The ship shook again but he didn't know why. It wasn't a collision. *Maybe their … wake? This doesn't make sense!*

Several red lights flashed on his panel, indicating more damage throughout the ship. *If I stay, they're going to shake me apart. I have to risk it … even with only one primary thruster*.

Rythi drew a deep breath, engaging his engines to send him downward, away from the larger ship. He began bucking, bouncing in his seat from some sort of agitation. Scans showed an energy field surrounding him, a powerful magnetic force holding him in place. *No! That's what's causing the problem! They're seizing me!*

A wave of panic hit Rythi hard and he engaged full power. The ship vibrated. Alarms went off. He engaged auxiliary power, dumped everything into the engines including life support.

His vessel didn't move an inch. It remained in place, stuck fast in their clutches. Some sense returned to him. He disengaged his engines with a frustrated sigh. The alarms went silent. Leaning back in his chair, he turned to the communications console, opening a channel. He cleared his throat, hoping for a robust tone but his voice came out weak.

"Attention, unknown vessel. I … did not mean to trespass on your space. I was merely stopping to determine my next destination. If you release my ship, I will be gone in the next twenty minutes. Please respond."

Static filled the speakers for several long moments. The ship finally passed over him completely. It was about the size of a Pahxin battleship. He saw the thrusters for only a moment before his vessel began to move, towed by theirs. As he was dragged away from his position, Rythi began to tremble.

"Please respond," he repeated. "I have no quarrel with you. I … I just want to leave this sector. Hello? Are you there?"

Rythi's craft turned in place until he appeared to be moving backward. Proximity meters showed he was rapidly approaching their ship, closing in swiftly. *They're going to dash me against their side? Why!* The scans indicated their shields would easily obliterate his craft, bursting his hull without a decline in their own power.

"Unknown vessel!" Rythi shouted. "I've done nothing wrong! You're about to kill me! Please respond! Please—"

A light bathed his ship, bright enough to make him close his eyes. *This is it! This is the end!* The metal around him groaned, vibrating until he swore the cockpit itself might crumble all around him. He closed gripped the seat tightly, closing his eyes in anticipation of a horrifying

death involving the cold vacuum of space.

A massive crash sent him flying from his seat, slamming off the control panel before bouncing Rythi to the floor. He lay on his back, groaning from the pain in his spine. Darkness settled over the ship as the power failed, the engines whining from the sudden disconnect. He tried to stand but his arms wouldn't respond. Everything felt numb.

Am I dying? Rythi felt cold but that could've just been the ship settling into no power. Without life support, the heat fled fast. He'd been in several situations where they lost power like that when he fought in the military. *We lost good men during those situations. And here I am … lost in the middle of nowhere … dying …*

Blinking lights flickered behind him. Rythi shifted to see sparks bursting from the wall over the passenger seats. He trembled, wondering what could possibly be happening next. When a torch cut through the metal, he realized he was being boarded. *They aren't even using the damn hatch! I must be inside their vessel.*

He would've loved to check his scanner, to see if the atmosphere was the same or if he'd survive when they burst through but he felt paralyzed as if he had broken his back. Even his fingers wouldn't respond but he could still move his head, still blink, still breathe and move his mouth.

"Help!" Rythi shouted. "Help! I'm injured! Please! Have some mercy for the love of all that's divine! Please!"

The wall came down a moment later, heavy metal clapping the grated floor. *My ship!* He knew such structural damage would be prohibitively expensive to repair. *As if I'm going to survive this. Finances aren't going to matter much at this point. I'm done.*

Light poured in from the breach, a light blue color. A bipedal creature stepped inside, wearing some kind of armor. It held a long device, possibly the torch it used to break into his ship. Rythi scampered away, moving toward the cockpit. He rifled through a box, grabbing out an old pistol he carried, he didn't even know if it worked.

He rolled onto his back, tears coating his cheeks as he trembled and took aim. The weapon warmed in his hands as he pulled the trigger, a red beam glancing off the wall beside the invading creature.

It flinched, darting to the side as it raised what looked like a rifle, aiming directly at him. Rythi screamed once as warmth bathed him, a hot flash that started in his gut and spread outward then … nothing. Blackness.

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Chapter 1

Gunnery Sergeant Geoffrey Heathrow saw plenty of action. Even before he joined the Gnosis and went into space, he'd fought in countless skirmishes, more than a dozen major battles. Violence stopped scaring him before he boarded his first shuttle for the stars but there were still things that gave him pause.

Standing on a stage with five other marines listening to the roaring applause of their peers made him nervous. They were all waiting to be honored for their part in the war with the Tol'An, the role they played as military professionals in joint operations with the Pahxin government.

Lieutenant Brent Fielding stood beside him wearing his officer's uniform. He stood out amongst the enlisted men beside him in the white jacket. Black SUVs brought them to the gathering on a military base in America, far from Gamma Alpha. It was nice to get away from headquarters, even if it was just another government facility.

As they arrived at the auditorium, Fielding took the Gunnery Sergeant aside.

"Heat," Fielding used his nickname though they'd been hanging on roles all morning. "You've been through more than any of us. The others have been chattering away the whole trip but not you. I know when a man's dreading something. What's the deal? Everyone has to celebrate once in a while."

"Can I speak freely?" Heat asked.

"Of course."

"This isn't my version of celebration, sir. I'm …" Heat shrugged. "I don't know. The fighting isn't what gets to me. Maybe the Orb … when I basically made contact with it … I guess that might have something to do with it? The sacrifices made along the way? I can't say for sure. I don't mean to seem morose."

"I'll tell you what." Fielding clapped his shoulder. "We'll go in there, give the brass what they want. We'll put on a smile, do the dance, offer the salute. When it's over, I'll take you guys for a meal. Just us.

The people who have survived the conflict with the Tol'An … and all the other crazy adventures you managed before I even came along."
Heat nodded. "I'm good with that."
The conversation worked long enough to get on the stage but once Heat found himself in front of all the other soldiers, waiting for Admiral Garlan Reach to perform his speech, his stomach started flipping. He couldn't believe nerves started bothering him when there wouldn't be any shooting, nothing more unknown than the cracks his friends would make.
I would rather be taking a space station right now. Heat thought back to some of their crazier moments. He fought on alien worlds, ancient facilities run by automation, and terrorist bases all over the galaxy. Of all the people on the Gnosis, he was one of the few who participated in all their operations. *And that's probably why I'm just tired*.
After he interfaced with the Orb, he had dreams about it. Nightmares really. The alien device gave three people a vision to play through, something from their past which acted as a security feature. His involved an old battle prior to joining the Gnosis, a situation where he and a close friend raided a military base.
And I've had the opportunity to relieve that just about every night. The problem wasn't the fighting. He dreamt of war often enough. The part he protested was constantly visiting with his best friend, continually finding waking up to know the man was gone. Lawrence Gorman joined the marines with him. They were extremely close.
The man sacrificed his life to save others on an alien world, his body obliterated in a blast. They had a service for him, memorialized his end but it didn't help much. None of the funerals did. Honors didn't matter in the wake of real loss. Fielding put Gorman up for a Medal of Honor.
Much as Heat hoped the man received it, posthumous awards only mattered to the people left behind. His family might appreciate it but what would it really bring them? An ounce of peace that their government continued to care about the man after he was gone. That was supposed to show how they felt while he was alive too.
I'm surprised that's not in some manual somewhere. Heat sighed, forcing

himself to focus on the tension in there tangible. I'veman stepping up to the podium.

Admiral Reach ran the military side of Gamma Alpha. He oversaw operational command of the marines stationed there and on every starship fielded by the human race. It was his privilege to stand before the collected officers and military men gathered to witness the honoring of their own.

"Fellow soldiers," Reach began. "Today, heroes stand before you. They are men who have risked their lives on countless occasions for the betterment of their people, the protection of our planet, and to forward our goal of exploring this grand universe. Each of them has sacrificed much, experienced injury, hardship … all with minimal complaint."

The last comment brought a chuckle.

"Captain Darren Gabriel leads these men. He will be coming up here in a moment but before he does, I have insisted on stepping on his toes to issue a promotion to a man who is long overdue in this regard. Gunnery Sergeant Geoffrey Heathrow has led his men with distinction and gallantry. Please step forward."

Heat bit his lip before proceeding. He took one step forward, turned and approached Admiral Reach. Turning on his heel, he remained at attention beside the man.

"After much deliberation, we have decided to elevate his rank past Master Sergeant straight to the highest enlisted rank available." Reach turned to Heat and offered him a box. "Congratulations, Sergeant Major Heathrow. You're an absolute inspiration to all of us and I look forward to many more years of working with you." He offered a crisp salute.

Heat took the box, returning the salute. "Thank you, sir."

"Would you like to say a few words?"

Heat knew *that* was coming. It took him a moment to compose himself, to prepare for the conversation. The men in the audience cheered noisily, offering a standing ovation before he even arrived. All the racket reminded him of some of the conflicts he'd been in, the recent battles.

He swore he heard a shout off to his left, a cry from one of his friends to get out. Turning to the side, he bit his lip when he found himself looking into the face of Fielding, who nodded with some encouragement. The clapping sounded like gunfire … then slowed down. Heat found himself back in the moment, ready to speak to his fellows.

Heat came forward to take the podium. “Like he said, we’ve been through a lot. I appreciate the opportunity to work beside all of you. I’m looking at the real inspirations. The man beside me, the man I’m leading, the man giving the orders. You guys are the reason many of us fight. Thank you.” He nodded to Reach and stepped back in line. The crowd roared their approval, clapping again. This time, Heat held it together, remained in the moment.

Fielding leaned close. “Good work. That was succinct and respectful. Ever thought of going to OCS?”

“I did,” Heat replied, “then I came to my senses.”

Fielding chuckled. “Don’t be surprised if someone else brings it up.”

I wonder if I should tell him that I’ve been thinking of leaving it behind, Heat thought. *Not today. Everyone wants to celebrate. I won’t bring them down.* He drew a deep breath, preparing for the rest of the ceremony. His mind drifted again, thinking of all the Orbs being connected back at Gamma Alpha.

More people should be concerned about that. Heat wondered if part of his anxiety came from what a group of scientists was doing eight thousand miles away. It clawed at the back of his mind, making him wonder what might happen next. They certainly didn’t make their intentions public.

Not that anyone would have a clue what it means. But Heat did. They promised they wouldn’t perform their experiment until a core group could be available to witness it. He qualified as one of those individuals and he wouldn’t miss it for the world. *I might be ready to go but not until I see it through. Regardless of the consequences.*

Or where it might lead them.

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Agent Cassandra Alexander looked forward to going home. Between missions, she'd been relegated to Gamma Alpha, required to participate in experiments or other mission critical activities. The chance to be away from all things military or operational sounded almost too good to be true. She half believed it would never happen. As she walked the corridors of the facility that had become one part home, one part containment cell, she looked forward to speaking to her sister, Tammy. The woman arrived just before the Tol'An attack, arriving to essentially cut Cassie out of her life. When everything went to hell, things changed.

Cassie escorted her to safety but not before they had to contend with some of the alien terrorists. After the assault was quelled, things moved into fast forward. The Gnosis departed the system to finish their enemies off and claim the last two Orbs. There wasn't time for an intimate conversation.

In fact, they barely had a chance to talk at all. Tammy proved to be okay so Cassie rushed off to a shuttle. That summed up her life since boarding the Gnosis. Perhaps the constant motion wouldn't have bothered her so much if it hadn't involved family. Joining the AIA meant a lot of hard work.

Even as a computer analyst, Cassie put in long hours though office time could not compare to being in the field. Never mind the fact she experienced a totally different type of stress than the average spy. Spending time on the Gnosis wasn't infiltrating an organization or planting bugs at an enemy stronghold.

They visited ancient civilizations, fought incredible battles, and confronted obstacles beyond imagination. Cassie carried stories with her that would last a lifetime and she had barely scratched the surface of what might be possible in the universe. Many came as a direct result of contact with the Orbs.

Without containment or maintenance, the power left unchecked could alter the world around them. They'd seen it at a space station where the power combined with tech gone mad, corrupting the minds of those around them. Telepathy, mental powers, the esoteric … all

possible with Orb methods. Technology well beyond the comprehension of man.

Or the people who lost their entire culture for that matter. Those who did know what they were doing made radical decisions, crazy sacrifices such as losing their *physical* forms. Others experienced a cataclysm, some form of mass destruction. That seemed to come from a type of virus, a released computer program from a central point to wreck tech heavy planets.

Fortunately, the current civilizations proved to be immune to the program simply because their technology evolved differently. Had it not, they would've experienced the same meltdowns, the same crashes. Perhaps not a planetary scale. Orb technology hadn't proliferated all of Earth but damn near close.

And now we get to find out what happens when you connect all six together. Cassie sighed at the thought. Director of the AIA, Beaumont Dulain, reached out to her as soon as the Gnosis returned. Once she let him know they had the Orbs, he immediately started in on her being present for the final tests.

"You're the only one who has been through this from the beginning," Dulain said. "I'm glad to have you in on this. The Pahxin will have their best people there."

"What about Thayne?" Cassie asked. "He'll certainly represent us."

"The war's over and he's a Pahxin first and foremost. I would say that if he sides with anyone, it will be them. Besides, you're in *my* organization. I'd put my faith in you over any scientist. Anyway. Just be there and do what you've been doing. I couldn't be prouder of your accomplishments. Sincerely, you've done a fantastic job."

"Thank you." Cassie didn't feel the sincerity but she recognized she might simply be tired. "What happens when it's over?"

"Pardon?" Dulain asked.

"When we've finished with the experiment. What's going to happen?"

"We'll work on diplomacy with the Pahxin," Dulain replied, "the Gnosis will finally have the opportunity to fulfill their purpose of exploration. Colonization plans are underway. Candidates are being called for as we speak. Our world is about to become a whole lot

bigger. It's an exciting time to be alive."
Cassie cleared her throat. "I don't mean to be selfish … but I meant for me. What's next for me?"
"Oh." Dulain chuckled. "That's perfectly understandable. You know, you've done so much for the AIA, for your planet, for everyone … I'd say you're going to be able to write your own ticket soon. Want to explore with the Gnosis? I'm sure we can make an arrangement. Would you rather stay here, work a desk again? It'll be up to you."
"I see." Cassie liked the sound of the offer but she couldn't get ahead of herself. "I guess I'll worry about it when we're done."
"Perfect." Dulain nodded. "I'll wait for your decision."
After arriving at Gamma Alpha, Cassie had some time to think about it as she headed down to see her sister. Tammy remained on the base, promising to be there when the Gnosis returned. She made it clear she didn't really feel safe, not after what happened during the attack. Commander Vincent Bowman, first officer of the Gnosis, offered to accompany her on the visit. Cassie figured she'd introduce the man to her sister after they were on better terms, once they got through the stress of recent events. She had to admit, things were getting serious with him, enough so that she couldn't imagine being apart from him. *So much that I'd want to travel with the Gnosis on another journey though?* Cassie wasn't so sure about that. *I need to have a talk with him about his own plans. But one person at a time.*
Cassie found Tammy sitting alone in the mess hall. The kitchen staff cleaned up from the breakfast rush. Her sister stared out the window, head resting on her chin. A full glass of soda sat beside her, straw askew.
"Hey there," Cassie said, taking a seat across from her. "I made it back."
"Admiral Reach let me know," Tammy replied. "I had no idea what you learned how to do … what you had to do."
"Just going to dive in, huh?" Cassie tilted her head. "No preamble? Right to questions?"
Tammy nodded. "You've had to fight out there … like a soldier?"
"Yes." Cassie leaned back. "All manner of things. But that's not the

sum total of what we've done out there. It's been good. We've learned a lot about our technology … about the universe. It's not pure exploration but that doesn't mean we're not still discovering things. We've seen things you wouldn't even believe."
"I can only imagine." Tammy sighed. "Talk about the terrorists. What was that all about? The … Tol'An."
"They're gone." Cassie shrugged. "That fight's over. They won't be back."
"I almost died!"
Cassie took her sister's hand. "I didn't let that happen. And you won't experience anything like that again. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a fluke, that's all." She drew a deep breath. "You still going to cut ties? Move on and all that?"
Tammy looked in her eyes. "Do you want me to?"
"No. Not when you brought it up before and not now."
"Me either." Tammy sighed. "I don't know, I thought you were a terrible influence, a bad idea … a warmonger or something. I can see in your eyes you don't like this stuff. You didn't enjoy that fight we were in. You weren't excited about everything going on. That was when I really knew how wrong I was … plus … you came for me."
"You're my sister." Cassie smiled. "I'd risk a lot for you. Way more than my life. And anyway, my work here at Gamma Alpha's almost done. We've got one more thing to do and I have to decide where I want to be."
"What're the options?"
Cassie shrugged. "The world's kind of my oyster at the moment. I need to think about it but … not before it's all done, you know? I need to know that this is behind me first." She tapped her sister's arm. "I have less serious news. I'm seeing someone. A guy I met during this project."
Tammy's eyes widened. "What? You?"
"I know, right? He wanted to meet you today but I thought we should talk first."
"Do you have a picture?"
Cassie chuckled. "Yeah, let's have lunch and I'll tell you all about him.

When we're done, and you take off, I'll contact you. We can get together again, you can meet Vincent and maybe help me decide what to do with my future." She tried hard not to think about the Orbs being connected deep in the base.

This needs to be a positive gathering, Cassie thought. *Tammy deserves my full attention. Besides, there'll be plenty of time to worry later. Besides, I won't have much of a choice. No, now's the time to relax. Tomorrow will come soon enough.*

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Captain Desmond Bradford finished dinner in his quarters on Gamma Alpha, reading over the reports for the coming day. Sometime after lunch, all six of the Orbs would be hooked together. They planned to conduct one final experiment before negotiations with the Pahxin kicked into high gear.

Having all the devices in the same place at the same time represented an opportunity that may not have been possible again. Once they were separated from one another, some returned to the Pahxin, some left on Earth, they wouldn't be able to see what happened with them. The theories ran the gamut.

Doctor Harper thought they'd uncover new possibilities, some kind of rare information left hidden there by those who built them. Thayne Rindala was under the impression they'd uncover historical records, a real glimpse into the culture capable of designing such wonders. Gil Vaedra was particularly excited about that one.

Some of the military people didn't think anything special would happen. In fact, a few even felt they wouldn't do anything at all because they were *meant* to be located at different points around the galaxy. They were communications devices, databases meant to keep cultures connected.

Engineer Nathan Webber thought they might even be dangerous. He offered up a possibility that if all of them were brought back together, there may have been a failsafe to destroy them all. That didn't make sense to many people, they argued as to why such a thing would be

built but he was just offering a theory.
Desmond was anxious to get it over with. He wanted to get on with other things. The Tol'An was gone. There were other things to worry about besides experiments. The Kalrawv Group needed to be taken to task eventually, especially after all the things they'd done. He also wanted to see the Pahxin home world.
The exchange of ideas seemed far more valuable than messing with technology they barely understood. Desmond figured a group of scientists should simply study them from afar, attempt to use them as they had. Whatever they discovered could be debated and tested for safety prior to attempting anything drastic.
A collective science group comprised of both our planets would probably be the best plan, Desmond thought. *Something neutral from the governments.* They would each have their own versions, of course. No matter how much two cultures trusted one another, some small amount of suspicion always remained. Otherwise, they'd just combine their resources, elect officials together, and smooth their differences. *My opinions don't mean much in this case*.
Desmond's com went off, indicating he had a meeting with Admiral Reach. They were going to discuss the role of the Gnosis going forward. Several crew members made it clear they wanted to stay aboard. Those were the explorers, the ones who knew nothing would stop them from going into space.
Others wanted out. The fighting and bizarre nature of some of their encounters pushed them to seek their livings elsewhere. Desmond didn't blame them but he hoped they might calm down. If they gave exploration a chance, they might remember why they signed up in the first place.
Of course, Desmond couldn't promise there would be no action. The universe had plenty of dangers besides the Tol'An. The Kalrawv Group, pirates, raiders, undiscovered cultures … they were all there waiting and that was part of what made the prospect of travel exciting.
Desmond arrived at Reach's office right on time. The older man poured them both a drink and offered him a toast. "To our military

success and what it means not only for our people but the future of space travel."
"I'll drink to that. Desmond tapped his glass and sipped. The bourbon went down hard, burning all the way. "Good stuff, there."
"Thanks." Reach grinned. "So … we have no idea what's going to happen with the Pahxin. We've started off on a friendly foot so it's likely we'll continue that way. It all depends on how demanding both sides decide to be. I'm banking on a fairly short period of time before we have a realistic treaty in place."
Desmond nodded. "I can agree with that."
"We're very nearly done constructing another vessel like the Gnosis. Unfortunately, it's not quite there yet. You might get the job of ferrying our diplomats about the galaxy. I'm sure you anticipated that though."
Desmond hadn't but he should have. Humanity possessed the resources to build more ships. They already had defensive satellites to protect the planet. The next step involved military vessels and others for exploration, science, aid.
"Of course," Desmond said. "A little more diplomatic duty won't hurt anyone, right?"
"I'm glad you feel that way. Afterward though, I figure we'll work with the astronomy team to figure out what to survey for colonization. We'll work with the Pahxin to ensure we're not stepping on any toes and make things happen. By the time we're ready to put people down on those worlds, we'll have a fleet to defend them."
"I spoke with Ulian Hataran about a unified police force," Desmond said. "They've been thinking of starting something up that could patrol known space, visit different colonies. Not necessarily military but still capable of keeping people safe. I would imagine we'd want to get in on that."
"Absolutely." Reach smiled. "I love how open the future is. We have so much to look forward to, so many things to do and attempt. I hope you're feeling it. I want you on the Gnosis throughout this or maybe even on a military flagship if you'd be interested. The possibilities are endless."

“I agree.” Desmond sipped his drink again, staring at the window. “What do you think will happen when we hook those Orbs together and switch on those relays?”
Reach sighed, his excited expression melting to one of concern. “Truth be told, I have no idea. Just between us, I’m not super happy about it happening but getting those tested comes from the very top. We’ve got diplomats talking to the Pahxin about it and they’re just as curious. And the AIA … Jesus, you’d think this experiment was their sole purpose.”
“Dulain?” Desmond asked.
“Oh yeah. The guy’s obsessed with uniting the six Orbs.”
“Does he have a good reason?”
Reach thought about the answer for a moment. “I have to admit, it’s not a *bad* one. He thinks we’re going to find out what happened to the race that built them. He believes we need this information to ensure we don’t destroy ourselves. Noble enough, if you ask me. And it makes perfect sense.”
“I agree. If we get historical information off the things, then it’ll be worth it. You want to know what I think is going to happen?”
“Sure.”
“Nothing.” Desmond shook his head. “Not that we’ll see anyway. Have you noticed the Orbs dish out information as we’re ready to receive it?”
“Thayne suggested that bringing the six together could override any sort of safety protocols,” Reach pointed out. “Which means we could literally pull *anything* from them.”
“Hm. I don’t know.” Desmond sipped again. “I suppose I don’t have the experience to go beyond that hunch.”
“We won’t have to wonder much longer.” Reach tapped his tablet. “Tomorrow afternoon, we’re going to engage the experiment.”
“That seems awfully fast.” Desmond frowned. “Have they done some risk assessment? Presented the findings? Anything?”
Reach nodded. “They sure have.”
“I hate to seem like I want to stand in the way of progress …”
“We’re men who hate the unknown,” Reach said. “It’s hard to plan a

military operation without good information. Science is about speculating then using a specific set of guidelines to prove or disprove the idea. They can't *know* what will happen until they try. All the speculation in the world won't make us feel better either."
"That's very true."
"It isn't like exploration," Reach continued. "With that, we can just go to the place and see what's going on. Is the planet safe? Is it hostile? We can look at it with our own eyes, scan it, visit it if we have to but with these … the Orbs … this will be the ultimate form of discovery. At least that's the selling point from Harper and crew."
"I hope they're right." Desmond finished his drink. "I think I'd like to get some rest before we start the day of discovery. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?"
"Not right now." Reach stood and they shook hands. "Thanks for stopping by. Tomorrow, we'll either have a whole lot or nothing at all to talk about. I don't know which one to look forward to."
"Me either, sir." Desmond grinned as he headed for the door. "Me either."

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Chapter 2

Rythi's eyes ached as he peeled them open. A chill gripped his spine, dancing down his limbs to make his fingers numb and his feet ache. *Did I fall asleep on the deck?* He wondered about the nightmare, the series of terrible events that befell him while sitting in deep space. *I need to check my bearing. What happened to me?*

He sat up, stretching his shoulders. He was about to yawn when he found himself staring at a young woman crouched before him, a Pahxin wearing a gray jumpsuit. Scampering back, he collided with a wall, swallowing hard. "How'd you get here?" The question made him curse internally. She wasn't on his ship. *That wasn't a nightmare!*

"The same way as you, I imagine," she replied. He peered into her green eyes, partially obscured by chunky brown bangs hanging in her face. "They took my mining vessel. I was prospecting on the frontier. Way out when it happened." She smirked. "I was in my mining laser when the first rumble came."

The rumble. Rythi remembered it happening to him. He'd been in the engineering section, attempting to fix a melted conduit when the whole ship shook. The collision knocked him down. "Did they cut through the hull of your ship?"

The woman nodded. "After they sucked me into their ship. Tractor beam of some kind. It disabled all the systems on my ship and there I was. Stuck."

"What do they want? Who are they? Kalrawv?"

She shrugged. "I really can't say. My name's Asti."

"Rythi," he replied. "How long have you been here?"

"A few days as far as I can tell. My tablet doesn't work." Asti gestured around the room. "There were other people here before I got in the room. There were clothes in here that I didn't have. I don't know what happened to them before you ask."

"We have to find a way out of here." Rythi stood up, wincing when his knee seized up. "Ouch, it's numb!"

"Yeah, I could've warned you about that. When you first wake up

from their stuff, it's hard to move. Whatever they gassed us with was pretty effective, huh? Totally knocked me down."
"I thought I couldn't breathe their atmosphere." Rythi scowled. "But this seems okay. Are we prisoners? What's going on here? And why would they bother? My ship's a passenger liner. A small one at that! What could they possibly gain by stealing it? Or destroying it for that matter? It was pretty trashed when they got done."
"My mining ship wasn't top of the line either," Asti said. "I needed this prospecting run to pay off or I wouldn't have been able to afford the maintenance. It was getting pretty bad. Guess I don't have to worry about that right now though, huh?"
"Yeah, we have much bigger problems." Rythi rubbed his eyes. He moved about the room, measuring it to thirty by thirty. All the walls appeared exactly the same, sheer metal. The walls and ceiling matched. They were in a great box without an obvious exit. "This is not at all intimidating. Have you tried to get out?"
"I've done what you just did," Asti said, flopping on the ground. She leaned against the wall and drew her knees up to her. "But after I touched everything and found no indents, no dimples, nothing at all in fact, I gave up. I figure if other people got out, they'll come for us eventually."
"Maybe they waited until the people died," Rythi pointed out. "Did you stop to think of that?" He started pushing on the walls, moving five feet and pushing again. "There *must* be something. Someway out of here. We have to find it before they let us starve to death or worse." He paused. "Wait. There aren't any facilities in here."
"You mean like waste facilities?" Asti asked. Rythi nodded. "I noticed that too. And no waste."
"So they must've let someone out to relieve themselves." Rythi scowled. He commenced with his exploration of the box again, continuing around the room as he meticulously pressed at each wall. Asti watched him but didn't move to help. He found it annoying.
"Would you like to join me?"
"Maybe if I had any idea what you were doing." Asti tilted her head. "Even if you found a door, it's not like the thing will budge just

because you're pressing your weight against it. Please. Their technology was like nothing I'd ever seen before. I'm fairly certain we can't get out of here without at least a tool."

Rythi felt a sense of despair filling his chest but he wasn't ready to give up. Asti had been there longer than him, she had plenty of time to dread the situation but he hadn't. He wanted to make something happen and if that meant exhausting himself through exploring the room, then so be it.

He checked his pockets, finding a single wire from when he tried to repair the ship. He almost cast it away in frustration but left it there. A sigh took him. *We're going to die of starvation in here. That's just perfect.*

He tilted his head and observed the ceiling. It was made up of grating, dark holes marring the surface. "That's odd." He muttered. The floor was like the walls and he *swore* the ceiling had been before he started moving about. "Was the ceiling always like that, Asti? Always with the holes?"

Asti looked up and gasped, stumbling to her feet. "No … no, it wasn't. How could that have happened?"

"We're dealing with technology far beyond anything I've ever seen."

Rythi leaned against the wall, regarding the ceiling. The floor began to vibrate. "Uh oh. I … I think I know what's happening."

"What?" Asti rushed over to him, grabbing his arm. "What's going on?"

Rythi stared at the ceiling. It began to warble as a strange scent filled the air. He turned to her. "They're gassing us again."

"No!" Asti dropped down low to the ground. "Come on! Get down here." Rythi followed her lead. "Breathe shallow and don't move. Remain motionless and relax as much as you can. The less you struggle, the less oxygen you need. We might be able to stay awake if we remain aware. Just hang on with me."

Rythi fought to remain calm, to not panic. He closed his eyes, envisioning an open field he'd visited a few years earlier, a place he dropped off several passengers. It allowed him to relax his muscles, to draw short breaths. His chest hurt. He ignored the pain. Asti squeezed

his hand as a foul scent tickled his nose.
"We've got this …" Asti's voice sounded far away. She whispered his name. "Slower. Short breaths."
Rythi could barely handle it. He knew he'd gasp soon, draw in a deep breath of the stuff. His senses began to darken, making his body tremble. Something hissed in the background, the wall parting off to their left. He remained motionless, waiting as air flooded the room.
"They're coming in," Asti whispered. "We might have a chance … I think we can breathe again."
Rythi sniffed. The scent remained but it was diluted. His limbs still felt heavy, his vision swimming but he felt as though he might be able to move. *We're only going to have one shot*. He didn't know what they were facing, what culture or group but whatever they were, they were not above kidnapping.
They destroyed my home and Asti's as well, Rythi clenched his fists. *It's time to fight … to find a way off this ship and get some help. Problems with the law be damned, the Pahxin government has to know about this*.
Footsteps clapped on the ground, echoing in the cell, metal on metal scraping along. Rythi didn't think they could take their captors, not head on but they might have a chance to outrun them. Where they went from there, he had no idea. *I'm taking a chance but what's the alternative? Let them kill us?*
At least two figures entered the room. Rythi put them at less than fifteen feet away, just on the edge of the room. A high pitch squeal emanated from one of them. "Now!" Rythi shouted, climbing unsteadily to his feet. He saw the two figures, dressed the same as the one who boarded his ship before. They both stepped back, seemingly surprised by his motion.
Asti did the same, grabbing his hand. The two of them darted for the open door, running past their captors. They emerged into a long hallway, metal like their cell but extending down as far as the eye could see. There were indents all along the way, possibly entrances to additional holding chambers.
Behind them was a wall. There was only one way to go. Rythi feared running, of giving them a solid target to shoot them in the back as

they ran but there was no choice. They were committed to fleeing.
"Go!" He shouted. "Run!"
They moved, picking up the pace until they were sprinting. Passing by dozens of the indentations, it felt like they might run forever before the place changed at all. Footsteps behind them sounded far off. Rythi risked a glance back, noting that the armored creatures were following but not running.
Are they not trying to catch us? Rythi returned his attention in front of them, cursing as he saw a blank wall coming up ahead. *A dead end? Or another door? How does it open! No!*
"What're we going to do?" Rythi shouted. They reached the end. He pounded on the wall, spinning in place to face the approaching aliens. "Asti, I hope you have an idea."
Asti stepped in front of him, her fists clenched. He watched her curiously but also with some desperation. If they didn't think of something, they'd be captives again or worse. The aliens might simply kill them. The two armored creatures were still several feet away, approaching with seemingly deliberate slowness.
"I do have an idea …" Asti turned to him. "Try to open it. Push, prod, beg, plead … whatever it takes. I'll buy you a few moments."
"What do you mean buy me … what're you going to do?"
"Whatever I can." Asti advanced on the two approaching aliens. Rythi shook his head, turning back to the wall. He shoved at it, kicked it, ran his fingers along the edge but there was nothing there. It was just as smooth as the walls they found back in their cells.
But I know *it must open!*
"Stop!" Asti shouted. "I demand to know why you've kidnapped us! What do you want? Where do you come from?"
At least she didn't charge over and attack them, Rythi thought. *I thought that was the plan*. He stepped back, looking up at the ceiling them down to the floor. There were no holes, nothing at all. Then, he noticed it. A small crease near the wall, just big enough for a keycard of some kind.
Wait! Rythi yanked the wire from his pocket and crammed it into the hole, jiggling it about wildly.

“Answer me!” Asti continued. “You cannot hold us! This is not lawful!”
Rythi felt the wire snag on something. He worked at it, sawing and toying until a spark emitted from the hole. He winced … the door opened! The hallway beyond was different than theirs. It was brown, with obvious doors and even a window looking out at space.
“Asti!” Rythi shouted. “Come on! Hurry!”
She rushed to his side and they ran again, hustling down the hall. Now the aliens chased after them with some speed, moving quickly. They rounded a corner, moving toward an open doorway to the right. As they entered, a man stood from a desk, fumbling for something on his belt.
He had bluish skin and eyes so gray they practically melted into the whites. Asti dove over the desk, tackling him to the ground. Rythi joined her, grabbing the item off his belt. It was shaped like a gun with a small dimple where the trigger should be. Aiming it at the wall, Rythi depressed it, making a blue beam leap out.
“Stop!” Rythi aimed the weapon at their captive. “Don’t move!”
The alien looked at both of them with wide, fear filled eyes. “Can you understand us?” Asti asked. She waited for a moment before turning to Rythi. “They may not have a translator.”
More noise came from down the hall. Possibly the two pursuers they left catching up. Rythi motioned for her to bring the man up. “We may have to use him as a hostage to get out of here. Let’s hope they understand a threat.”
“We’ll make them,” Asti said, drawing him to his feet. “We will make them.”

***

Ulian Hataran arrived at the medical bay on board the Stalwart. They were on their way to Earth so he might witness the connection of all six Trindishas together. The momentous occasion should have thrilled him but he found himself consumed with worry for a particular man, one who essentially saved his life during a harrowing shuttle ride.

Eyros Tuln has given him a ride up to the Stalwart when the Earth fell under attack. The man proved to be an excellent pilot but received a grievous injury when they landed. Ulian promised to check on him personally. As soon as word went out about the young man waking up after surgery, Ulian headed down to see him.

Eyros had the bed inclined so he could sit up. He smiled but looked exhausted. Pale features were drawn with dark circles beneath his green eyes. A woman stood beside him, holding his hand. They were speaking quietly though it looked like she might've been scolding him about something.

"Hello," Ulian announced himself, making the young woman jump. She stood at attention but he waved at her. "Please, don't. I'm not here in any sort of official capacity. I just wanted to check on Eyros here. How're you feeling, son?"

"I'm doing better, sir." Eyros smiled. "The wounds were as bad as I thought though. The doctor told me three times I'm lucky to be alive."

"I'd like to say that I am as well," Ulian replied, "but that wouldn't be true. I owe it to your skill, though. That's for sure."

"Not at all. I was just doing my job."

"Ah, a little humility." Ulian chuckled. "That's a refreshing trait in one so young."

"I do try, sir." Eyros looked up at the woman. "This is my betrothed, Olia."

"How do you do, sir?" Olia smiled. "I work in engineering."

"A pleasure to meet you, Olia. You each seem to have quite the catch on your hands." Ulian put his hands on his hips. "I can see why you were scolding him when I arrived now."

"Oh, sir …" Olia's cheeks turned red. "I just … I was very worried. It was a gentle ribbing."

"I understand completely. My mother issued such reprimands to my father quite often. He was a fighter pilot. Never quite got to where I am now before he died." Ulian turned to Eyros. "You are quite superior to his skills, I can tell you that much. Tell me, did you fly fighters before your current duty? I … wanted to hear it from you rather than look at your record."

“Yes, sir,” Eyros confirmed. “I flew in the battle of Signa and the skirmish of Olden. You may remember those were fighter heavy battles with a large number of enemy ships.”
“I do remember.” Ulian hummed. “Do you know how many confirmed kills you have from those?”
“I retired from the fighters with a combined total of eighty kills.” Eyros shrugged. “A good number in comparison to the rest of my wings.”
“Yes, I believe the best in the fleet right now has only one hundred five confirmed.” Ulian lifted his brows. “My goodness … so why did you stop? What compelled you to retire?”
“I wanted a change and in all honesty, a man needs to understand his limitations.” Eyros cleared his throat and looked at Olia.
Ulian smiled. “Ah. You became engaged.” He looked at Olia. “I have not seen a better reason to stop fighting in a very long time.”
“Thank you, sir.” Olia averted her eyes.
“Well, I’ll let the two of you get back to your conversation.” Ulian patted Eyros on the knee. “If you want to be my personal pilot in the future, let me know. I will fly with you in the cockpit anytime.”
“Thank you, sir. You did pretty well on the turret.”
“Nonsense. It had been years since I fired one. I’m going to get in the simulator in fact so I’m not quite so embarrassing.” Ulian turned to Olia. “Hold on to this one. He’s a good man.”
“I will.” Olia took Eyros’s hand again as they returned to their conversation. Ulian headed for the bridge.
He felt much better about the incident knowing that the young man survived. The doctor’s report said he’d make a full recovery as well. *Thank the Fates*. Ulian wondered when the two planned on marrying. He would’ve loved to attend, or even officiate their wedding if they’d let him.
I owe that boy a great deal. I’d like to do something positive for him when the time comes.
“Sir,” Morala Crelden, his first officer contacted him. “We will be emerging from hyperspace in the next thirty minutes. Should only be a two-hour flight to Earth from there.”

“Perfect,” Ulian said. “I’m going to leave you in charge while I witness the experiment. What’re your thoughts about all this?”
“It will be the greatest discovery of our age or a stunning disappointment. Either way, I’m more interested in getting back to duty, myself.”
Ulian chuckled. “Of course you are. Wondering whether or not I’ve given you an endorsement for promotion?”
“It has been on my mind.”
“When we leave Earth, I’ll let you know. Ulian out.” He killed the com and headed for the bridge, considering what the future might hold. They’d been battling the Tol’An for some time. Now that the conflict was over, they could focus on far more important matters. But one more thing remained.
They had to see what the Trindishas were capable of. After that, they could return to business as usual but until then? Ulian did not feel the situation was over. Not quite yet.

***

Doctor Gil Vaedra woke with a start. Two medics stood beside him in an instant, one taking his hand. They asked half a dozen questions before he understood their words. The only important thing was that he knew the location of the Tol’An base. He needed to let the military people know right away.
“I need to speak with someone about the Tol’An,” Gil said. “Right away.”
“Sir.” The bushy haired man to his right cleared his throat. “That … well … they attacked Gamma Alpha. We repelled them.”
The blond woman to the left picked up the story. “The Pahxin fleet and the Gnosis went to their planet and finished them off. They’ve returned with the last two Orbs.”
“Apparently, they’re hooking them all together,” the man said. “But you’ve only just woken up. We need to run some tests to make sure you’re okay.”
“I’m fine.” Gil waved his hand at them. “So when are they doing this

experiment?"
"Today," the woman replied. "Later this afternoon I believe."
"I need to speak with Thayne … or Doctor Harper. Can you get them please?"
Less than ten minutes later, both people arrived to see him. Thayne gripped his arm tightly, offering a broad smile. "My friend, you gave us all quite a scare."
"I assume Cassandra made it through okay," Gil said. "Correct?"
Doctor Harper nodded. "She's fine. She even went on the mission."
"I see." Gil rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. "She must have a better connection to the devices than I did. I swore … hm. Well … it doesn't matter, now does it? I would like to be present for the experiment. Will that be a problem?"
"You must be there," Thayne said. "I insist."
"What do you anticipate will be the result?" Gil asked. "What are we hoping to see?"
"We've got all kinds of theories," Harper replied. "Mostly, we think we're going to tap into the archives of the people who built it. I believe we'll finally understand how and why they built them and how they got where they did. Why did these beings give out the Orbs in the first place? That's the question I want answered."
"I agree." Gil found the concept fascinating. He couldn't wait to see. "How long before I'm to be released?"
"Your scans are showing normal," Harper said. "You should probably get some food in you. Clean up and meet us down in the tech lab. That's where they all are. You can come see them for yourself." She grinned. "I think you'll find it fascinating. After cleaning them up, they're exactly the same. If we hadn't labeled them, it would be nearly impossible to tell them apart."
"How would you?" Gil asked.
"The default languages," Thayne replied. "They don't immediately alter to ours but rather start at what they were before we brought them here. We can change this, of course, but we haven't so we can study the other languages. They're fascinating. A linguist's dream. In fact, several from both Earth and our own home have started studying

them in earnest."
"And … the Tol'An?" Gil swallowed hard. "The medical person said they are finished. Is that … accurate?"
Thayne nodded. "Indeed. They are no longer a threat to anyone. The few who remain at large are leaderless. Their base has been occupied and the Pahxin military is scouring it even now for additional secrets, another location but they are convinced the last of them have been stamped out. Besides, they committed almost everything to assault Gamma Alpha."
"That's one nightmare none of us has to live with anymore." Gil rubbed his eyes. "Alright, I will take your advice. Get some food … clean up and be ready for this experiment. I really have to see it for myself. Thank you, for coming to see me. I appreciate it."
"Of course." Thayne gripped his hand tightly. "We'll see you there."
"Be careful," Harper added. "None of us wants you to be hurt by this. If you feel strange, I'd like you to leave. Make yourself and your mind the first priority. Are we agreed about that?"
Gil nodded. "Yes, of course. I don't want to end up here again. Oh. I assume Cassandra will be there?"
"Yes," Thayne said. "It's going to be a full house. We'll be recording things for those who … well, didn't think it would be a good idea to be standing around there in person should something go wrong. The highest authorities. Those in orbit who don't want to set foot on Earth yet. Those types."
"Ah, our leaders and those of Earth who don't understand enough of the technology to know whether or not they'll be zapped." Gil chuckled. "I know the type, believe me. My academy days showed me plenty of them. They are … cautious to a fault, I've found. Which I suppose I can't really blame them, considering their positions."
"They're not scientists," Harper said. "So they shouldn't be involved. I'm glad they're only watching." She turned. "We'll see you in the lab, Gil. I'm glad you're feeling better."
Gil watched them leave before rising from the bed. One of the medics gave him his clothes so he changed behind a privacy screen before returning to his quarters. He didn't have a lot of time to prepare

himself and needed to hurry but walking felt strange. The entire world around him seemed off.

Side effects of allowing my mind to touch the trindisha. Gil frowned at the thought. *We need to complete the interface device. No one should risk themselves like that again. It's far too dangerous. I may never have woken up.*

Gil encountered strange technology all over the universe. He'd made a life of seeking it out, studying the intricacies, writing papers, even selling some of the goods to the highest bidder. The Kalrawv Group in particular appreciated his efforts. They always counted amongst the true believers, those who would fund just about any excavation.

Providing it benefited them. Gil had no illusions about his employers in those cases. They were mercenary scum. His final encounter with them before the Gnosis brought him on board had proven that. They would've killed him, despite all the times they worked together. *For the corporation, everything is expendable. Even people*.

Trindishas in particular had never been his focus of study. They were so far out of his reach, he didn't want to bother attempting to hunt them down. The few times he wanted to have some interface time, he was put on a month long wait list. That was shortly after his academy days when he decided any answers he wanted could be found in space.

The real work is done in the field. Gil hadn't been the most rugged of men when he started but he learned quickly. Roughing it on dangerous planets proved to be far more difficult than he ever anticipated but it worked out. He believed he'd been forged into an adult by the trials he'd experienced in forgotten places, on inhospitable worlds.

Gil hoped he might see where it all began, to understand the origin of the cultures he found long dead and buried. That was his interest in the experiment they were about to perform and he struggled to keep his hopes reasonable. Part of him believed they would discover something incredible, a history altering truth.

But I have to temper those expectations. Gil prepared himself a meal, keeping himself calm as he did so. *This may be a big discovery but will it*

be one for my field? Ah, that's the trick … and what I need to be cautious about going in. The techies might get excited but I should not be holding my breath.

Thayne's confidence bolstered Gil's. The man's excitement was infectious. If anyone in the universe deserved to see what happened with six devices in the same room, it was Thayne. He had studied them since he was a child, making them his life's work. His passion had been so intense, they allowed him access to the databases before he entered the academy.

And even he does not know *what will happen.* Gil smiled. *I hope for his sake it will be a positive experience … or even something at all. They seemed more powerful when we put them together but they didn't do anything extraordinary. Of course, one could argue finding the final two despite security protocols was something.*

Gil didn't know for sure but he had little appetite for his food. He wanted to be amongst his peers, helping them with their work, witnessing the finalizing of their risk assessment. Most of it was probably already done. He'd be there to watch, like all the other tourists. The thought irritated him.

Maybe I'll better understand why it floored me but didn't put Cassandra down in the same way. Gil doubted it. *Oh well. I can't become depressed on the eve of this. I have to rally so I can be prepared to enjoy the success … or help assuage the disappointment.*

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Chapter 3

Cassie peered at herself in the mirror, adjusting her collar for the thirtieth time. She wore a white blouse, black slacks, and flat boots. Business casual felt reasonable for what may amount to a monumental occasion but maybe she should've gone for something straight comfortable instead.

Vincent came in behind her, dressed down in a long-sleeved tee shirt and dark jeans. "Hey." He hugged her from behind. "You still fretting about your outfit?"

Cassie nodded.

"Are you worried?"

"Very."

Vincent kissed the side of her head. "Don't be. It's an experiment. They're not putting you back in another chair. You're going to be fine. In fact, the whole point of us showing up is to watch. And if you want my opinion—"

"I don't," Cassie interrupted with a smile.

"Well, you're going to get it anyway. I doubt anything's going to happen. Nothing so monumental to warrant all these people showing up. In fact, I would've done the damn experiment already and reported the results if I were them. They might disappoint a lot of important people."

"I think you might be wrong." Cassie sighed, leaning into him. "Something will definitely happen. Some people have said they haven't been in the same room since they were created. Thayne suggested they may never have been … that they built the devices as needed. Whichever is true, we know they become exponentially more powerful with proximity."

"Just because we found the Tol'An doesn't mean we're about to uncover the mysteries of the universe." Vincent stepped away. "I think we have to temper our expectations accordingly."

"My only expectation is that I'm going to be a nervous wreck." Cassie checked her com. "We have to go. The pre-check experiment begins in

the next fifteen minutes. I want to be there to see them go through the steps."
"Okay. I'll check in with Captain Bradford on the way."
"Are you really going to wear jeans and a tee shirt?" Cassie asked.
"Yeah, because I'm practically a civilian. Besides, if we stand around for hours, I want to be comfortable for a change." Vincent grinned. "Don't worry, if it comes down to the two of us, they're going to be paying attention to you. You've actually done something interesting with this stuff. Hell, you're probably one of the experts."
"I suppose." Cassie waved her hand at him. "You're one of those guys who looks posh in a uniform then proves to be ultra casual, huh?"
Vincent shrugged. "I wouldn't go *that* far … but I do enjoy some comfort." He took her arm. "Come on, miss worry. Let's get out of here before *you* decide to change."
They headed out together from Cassie's quarters, moving down the empty hallway. The base felt deserted when they returned. All the nonessential personnel left. Marines remained on hand for protection, all the technicians and engineers were there but civilian contractors had been moved to a secure facility.
Those who remained passed the rigors of an AIA security test. Dulain saw to it personally to ensure they didn't have any problems. Those involved in the attack on Gamma Alpha had been defeated, their financiers were tracked down and arrested. Air cover remained in effect as fighters ran patrols twenty-four seven.
Fortunately, they did so high enough to not be constantly annoying. Even with the human villains defeated and the Tol'An out of the picture, the military remained on high alert. They seemed utterly convinced that some other enemy was just waiting to swoop in and mess with them. Vincent expressed his own concern that there may be more threats out there ready to fill the void left by their enemies. Cassie figured the Kalrawv Group was the only organization to worry about and they didn't seem like the *attack a planet* type. Especially since they maintained a positive front on the Pahxin home world. No, if someone wanted to cause real trouble again, they were going to have to work to become a threat.

Dulain met them in the hallway some fifty yards from the lab. He smiled, waving his hand over his head. “You both made it! Fabulous.” He shook Cassie’s hand then Vincent’s. “I hope you’re both excited. The tension in there is tangible. I’ve never seen scientists look so nervous while laughing before. I feel like I should be intimidated.”
“Maybe we should,” Vincent replied. “When scientists have no idea, that’s probably the best time to worry.”
Dulain chuckled, turning to Cassie. “He’s probably right. What about you? How do you feel about all of this? What’s your take on the current situation?”
Cassie weighed her response for several moments, unsure if she should be honest. Her director’s enthusiasm seemed ironclad, meaning she doubted anything she said would dampen it. Whether or not that was true, she would’ve rather tested the waters with a few probing questions but she frankly didn’t have the energy to play politics.
“I’m afraid,” Cassie said. “Straight terrified of it.”
“Really?” Dulain’s eyes widened. “Why?”
“You haven’t done what I have,” Cassie replied. “After mentally connecting with the Orbs multiple times, I can tell you they scare me. The immensity of what they represent, the power inherent in each of them … I mean, they’ve taken something we only touched on, psychic ability, and proven it’s a viable means of communication. That’s huge.”
“Exactly! It’s monumental. A real achievement. Why would you consider it scary then?”
Vincent answered, “progress unto itself can be frightening. It represents change. How we do things, how we perceive the world … this in particular expands the mind and exposes it to powers we don’t necessarily understand. Our heads are the one place we can truly be alone without the risk of anyone listening in. Telepathy changes that.”
“Yes, I suppose that’s a point.” Dulain motioned with his head for them to follow him. “Think of the possibilities for our division.”
“That statement did not surprise me,” Cassie said. “But even that’s dangerous. People think things that aren’t true all the time. If we started using it against them … or even acting on that type of

intelligence, we could be in a lot of trouble. Like … when someone watches the news, they sometimes put themselves in the shoes of a criminal.

"Would that put them on a watch list?"

"We'd need a way to filter out the benign thoughts." Dulain rubbed his chin. "But that's just speculation. Let's get away from that right now. If you're not going in the chair, what're you worried about today?"

"I didn't have a choice the first time it happened," Cassie reminded him. "When we turn that stuff on, I have no idea what's going to happen and because that's the case from the time we brought our second one back, I might find myself in the same state only this time I'd be at the mercy of *six* of them."

"Okay, that's a fair point." Dulain sighed. "Maybe I shouldn't have insisted you come."

"I might be scared," Cassie replied, "but I want to see what happens. It feels like … I don't know … closure I suppose. I need this to move on to the next thing. Even if nothing happens, I'll feel better having seen it with my own eyes. Does that make sense?"

"It does." Dulain patted her shoulder. "I know I've been a difficult person to work for. You haven't agreed with my methods or even some of the things I've asked you to do. I'm glad you kept your integrity the whole time. You've been a good conscience to us and Christina has had nothing but fantastic things to say."

"I appreciate that."

"Get through today and I promise, we'll find you something to do worthy of your nobility." Dulain opened the door for them. "Now … let's witness a potential wonder."

Cassie exchanged a glance with Vincent before they stepped inside, moving into the controlled chaos of the tech lab. The six Orbs were set on pedestals, each elevated a good five feet above the floor. Relays were in place, conduits connecting them together. Technicians busied themselves with scans, testing connections while visually inspecting their work.

Vincent squeezed her hand, chasing away a sense of dread that

hovered at the back of her neck. She drew a deep breath and let it out, allowing her shoulders to relax. Gil waved at her from across the room. He looked much better, standing beside Thayne. She smiled and returned the gesture.

I'm so glad he's okay, Cassie thought. *I had a little survivor's guilt coming on after I woke up and he didn't.*

"Do you want to sit with the captain?" Vincent asked her. "Looks like he saved us a couple seats."

Cassie noticed the series of chairs near the control room. They were behind transparent blast shields, mostly there to ensure they weren't blinded when the Orbs lit up. If one of them blew up, nothing would protect any of them. She wondered how many people thought that could happen and what the odds were.

I can't even think about that. Cassie nodded at him. "Yeah, let's get settled in." The proximity to all the Orbs made her uneasy. She wanted them to get going before she freaked out or lost herself in the tension.

She greeted Desmond but let Vincent sit beside him. Only a couple people were missing from the assembly, one of them being Heat. She wondered if he might skip the whole thing. He probably didn't have to be there. Besides, the way he got involved with the Orb was the most violating at all.

At least Gil and Cassie tried to go into it. Heat was sucked in while on duty. He'd been recovering from an injury. It had to be frightening, which was not something a soldier handled well. Besides, he'd been through a lot, saw several friends die. If he retired, she wouldn't have been surprised.

Cassie leaned to Vincent, lowering her voice. "Do you think Gunnery Sergeant Heathrow will be here?"

"Yeah, he's on his way," Vincent said. "And he's Sergeant Major now. They gave him quite the promotion. Plus, there's talk of trying to get him into OCS. The marines want him to be an officer."

"Wow …" Cassie frowned. "Do you think he'll accept that?"

"Truth be told, I have no idea." Vincent shrugged. He turned to Desmond. "Captain, what do you think about them pushing Heat for

officer?"
"Doubt he'll do it," Desmond replied. "I don't know him super well but Captain Gabriel expressed his own doubts. He's been offered the opportunity to step it up several times before, always said no. He always wanted to be in the field as one of the men. But who knows? Maybe he's changed his ways since leading so many missions."
Cassie wondered about that. After Gorman died, Heat didn't seem as enthusiastic about conflict anymore. They'd been close friends, as close as any two men in the military could be she figured. She guessed each of them felt somewhat immortal while the other survived countless trials.
Heat probably felt like he lost half of himself on that mission, especially since Gorman sacrificed his life for them all. It had been a noble gesture but one that left them all with some amount of guilt. The gratitude came later when he was honored for his bravery. Cassie heard about such things but never saw them in person, never thought she *would* see them.
Heat remained somber after the service. It didn't help him get over the loss nor move on. Cassie tried to talk to him but he wasn't interested. She thought he might seek some kind of counseling later, or merely talk to some of his friends that understood what he'd been through. Even after she'd been through a great deal with him, she recognized that she was still an outsider, a civilian by comparison. AIA training didn't make her military. She didn't go through the sorority or fraternity that they embraced. They became friends, relied on each other but they were not the same.
And Cassie respected that. She only wished she could've helped.
"We'll begin in ten minutes!" Harper shouted so everyone could hear. "Prepare yourselves!"
Oh boy. Cassie leaned back in her chair, desperately fighting to remain calm. Vincent squeezed her hand again. The reassurance helped. *Let me get through this. I just have to see it all then I can walk away. Another hour, two at the most and I'm done. But let me get through it without incident. That's all I ask*.

***

Heat arrived at the laboratory wearing his dress uniform. He hadn't looked forward to returning to Gamma Alpha, half wondered if he could get out of it but that wouldn't have done well for the people he served with. Cassandra, Captain Bradford, Commander Bowman … they'd all be there and that meant the marine would attend as well.
Captain Gabriel stood beside him, a hard expression etched on his face. He looked over the room before leaning close to Heat. "This place looks like it's about to explode."
"I hope you mean that figuratively," Heat replied.
Gabriel actually cracked a grin. "Yes, quite."
"This is a big moment." Heat looked around, gesturing toward Captain Bradford and the others. "Looks like we have a front row seat for it. Shall we?"
"Go ahead." Gabriel patted his back. "I'm going to speak to Doctor Harper before this rodeo starts."
"Yes, sir." Heat headed over, offering a salute to Desmond and Vincent before shaking hands.
"Glad you could make it, Sergeant Major," Vincent said.
"Congratulations on the promotion."
"Thank you, sir." Heat nodded. "It came as a bit of a surprise during our ceremony honoring us for services rendered."
"Well deserved."
Heat turned to Cassie. "Hey there." He shook her hand. "How've you been?"
"Good." Cassie shrugged. "Or as good as could be expected given what we're about to see."
Heat frowned. "I know how you feel." Their eye contact told him they were simpatico in their concern. He didn't know what would happen but he'd been worried about it ever since they invited him to witness the event. Before that too, when they were on their way back from the Tol'An world. He knew curiosity would link them.
And somehow, we might never be the same.
"What's next for you?" Cassie whispered to him. Heat sighed.

“I don’t know.”
She smiled.
“You either?” Heat lifted his brows.
“Pretty much.” Cassie gestured to Gil with her head. “I bet he feels the same. How could he not?”
“At least people have been …” Heat struggled to find the right word. “Cool about it. I guess that’s the closest thing I could say. Maybe we understand PTSD better so they step back, let us figure out what we need.”
“Maybe.” Cassie frowned. “You know what I’ve been worrying about the most?”
Heat shook his head.
“Doing something else that other people call normal. Like … a desk job or even doing what the AIA normally does.” Cassie smirked. “Imagine that after all we’ve seen. Especially you. You were out there in each of those places. Think about staying here on Earth after all that. Just … integrating back into society.”
Heat struggled to feel normal after their ceremony. They went to a restaurant. Civilians thanked him for his service. He’d experienced such reactions before and the opposite for that matter. But Cassie was right. It felt different. Not just because he saw all those alien places. Contact with the Orb detached him in a way.
Like experiencing a higher power. Heat shivered at the thought. *I can’t believe I just likened these to divinity*.
Cassie patted his hand. “It’s okay to be freaked out.”
“Wouldn’t matter if someone had a problem with it,” Heat replied. “What I want to know more than anything is why it picked me. I wasn’t anywhere near the thing when we experienced that draw inward. Why the hell did it involve me at all? I wasn’t trained for it, didn’t have any interactions with the Orbs. You spent your entire career working with them!”
“Genetic predisposition,” Cassie replied. Heat heard the explanation before but he didn’t like it. He submitted to DNA testing, had them look up his parents’ records, even talked to them about where he grew up. None of the information came back with a conclusive answer. “I

see you don't like that answer."
"It's just a couple of words that don't make sense to me," Heat replied. "They're not comforting and no one can take the next step." He gestured to the Orbs. "If I get an explanation in the next twenty minutes, all of this will be worth it. I'll live with whatever happens next, you know?"
Cassie nodded. "I don't think we have a choice about that either. Living with it, I mean."
Christ, she's right. Heat sighed. *No amount of therapy in the world … in the universe is good enough to fix this. Nor is it equipped. They have nothing to base treatment on, no case like it to judge us by. We're the pioneers of new problems.* He leaned back in his chair and drew a deep breath. *Unless these damn things present the answer.*
It was possible that the Orbs might have a treatment plan. Their powers were totally alien to everyone. Their potential held no limits. He found himself wanting to have faith in them but once again he struggled with the concept of divinity. Granting them that designation went beyond everything he'd been taught.
People must have worshipped these in other times. Especially if they interacted with them psychically. They heard voices in their heads, got transported to mythical worlds. Did the Greeks experience some sort of manipulation to create all the legends that persisted through the years? *Now I understand the curiosity of these scientists.*
Heat wanted to know. He *had* to know. Everyone in that room had a different reason for being there, something besides an order or perceived obligation. Some question rested in their hearts and they hoped for an answer. Whether that answer proved to be simple or complicated, they wanted it.
Would they get it? That remained to be seen. Especially when a goodly number of the assembled held the cynical belief that nothing would happen when they plugged them all in, turned the knob, flipped the switch or did whatever else they planned to do. *What am I going to do with myself if this turns out to be nothing?*
The answer to that question scared him most of all. Heat knew he'd always wonder, always wish he'd witnessed some miracle offering the

answers to the universe. One of the biggest questions every person asked was the simple one: why do I exist? What brought *me* about in all the millions of possibilities?

Heat clenched his fists as Doctor Harper approached them. She held her tablet cradled in her left arm, her expression deathly serious. Her eyes danced amongst the assembled before she cleared her throat. Whatever she planned to say certainly received quite the preamble.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Harper said. “We have finished our preliminary work. My staff are ready to turn on the connections between the different Orbs, to start the experiment. I’m standing before you to offer one final chance to protest or raise any valid concerns prior to us pushing forward with this monumental moment.”

Everyone looked amongst each other but no one spoke. Not even a gentle murmur. Heat looked into Cassie’s eyes. They were prepared for the event. Perhaps not what came next but starting it felt okay.

Heat coughed. The sound punctuated the moment and Harper nodded her head.

“Then without further ado, we shall begin.” Harper turned away. “Thayne, you may commence with the next stage of our experiment. Throw the switch. Bring the Orb collective online.”

***

Rythi took control of their hostage, allowing Asti to keep the weapon. She pressed it against the man’s head. He lifted his hands defensively, flinching away from her. The two armored individuals appeared at the door, aiming their weapons without stepping into the room.

“Back off!” Rythi shouted. He waved his hands at them in hopes that might break through the language barrier. “We’ll shoot him!”

The man in his arms cleared his throat, gesturing toward the desk he’d been sitting at. He rattled off a series of sounds, they sounded enough like words that it made Rythi look at the desk. There didn’t appear to be anything on it, just a few trinkets but he had no idea what any of them were.

“What does he want?” Asti asked. “Do you think he has a translator

over there?"
"I have no idea," Rythi replied. He dragged the man to the desk. "I'm going to risk it. We have to talk to these people."
Asti backed away with them, the three moving awkwardly until they arrived at the desk. Their captive moved his hand slowly over to a device, tapping it once. He started making the sounds again but this time it was translated through a speaker located overhead. He spoke slowly, his voice trembling.
"What are you doing? Why are you holding this weapon to my head?"
"You took us prisoner!" Rythi grunted the words. They were translated to the strange sounds. "Why do you think we're doing this? We want you to let us go!"
Again, the device translated but this time, it was clear the alien wasn't speaking to them. "Are these two part of the salvage operation?"
"Yes." One of the two armored ones spoke. "In Sector Nine-Seven-Three."
"What're you talking about?" Asti tapped the man's head with the weapon. "What do you mean salvage? Our ships were operational! They were fine!"
"We …" The man paused, his face looking far more nervous. "Put the weapon down."
"There's no way." Asti tapped him again. "Tell those men to back off and lead us to our ships! Right now!"
"They're inoperable. Anything we've salvaged has been."
"Then where are the other people who were in our cell?" Rythi asked. "What about them?"
"Damaged …" The man flinched. "Please, you must understand that you cannot escape here. We are returning to our home port. Put the weapon down so you can be returned to a waiting room."
"This is pointless," Asti muttered. She aimed the weapon at the armored men. "Step back from the door! Now!"
They lifted their weapons, taking aim down the sites.
"I'm warning you!" Asti aimed at the man again. "Step back! Now!"
The guards turned their attention to the hostage. "Do it," he said. "I'll show them." He motioned with his head. "Grab the device on the

table. We can communicate with it that way."
Rythi motioned for Asti to take the thing. He had to hold their captive with both hands and the man seemed fairly strong. His biceps alone felt solid. If the alien wanted to break free, he likely could. Even in the military, Rythi wasn't in that good of shape. *I'm a pilot, not a ground soldier. This is terrible. We're no match for these things*.
As a prospector, Asti was in much the same position as Rythi. He didn't know her past, but unless she happened to be some kind of Special Forces soldier, he felt they were in over their heads. *Of course, we've gotten this far. These aliens seem surprised by our presence. Maybe I'm counting us short.*
"Good," their hostage said. "Soldiers, back into the hallway. Lower your weapons but escort."
"I'm warning you," Asti said. "If they try anything, you die first."
"I understand you. Just lead us out and go right. I will show you."
Rythi pulled him out into the hallway with Asti close behind. She kept the weapon on the man, holding it against his head as they moved. The two armored men lowered their guns and followed though they seemed far more at ease. Rythi risked a glance back at them once before directing his attention forward.
"Just over there," the hostage motioned with his chin. The translation came from the device, not as loud as the speakers but still easily heard. "That window there."
"We don't want a window," Rythi said, "we want our ships!"
"Go to the window, please."
Rythi dragged the man over to it, peering out. He gasped, staring down at the wreckage of well over a dozen ships laid out in what appeared to be a hangar. Some were in multiple pieces, others with gaping hull breaches. Exposed internal components looked blackened, damaged beyond repair.
"That's my ship!" Asti pointed. "There on the left! It's … what did you do to it?"
"In bringing it on board, the damage was too severe," their hostage replied. "It disintegrated. This has been the fate of all the salvaged vessels."

“Because you ran into us!” Rythi shouted. He scanned the area. His own vessel was lying on its side, two massive holes exposing the internal cabin on the side facing up. “My ship was about to be repaired when you hit me multiple times and used your tractor beam! What was the point? Why did you capture us?”

“Look up.”

Rythi complied, peering through a larger porthole into space. A planet loomed ahead, orange and gold on the surface with white clouds obscuring the darker peaks. Lights danced along the dark side where night had fallen, thousands of them, perhaps more. He gasped, loosening his grip on the man.

“We have returned to our home,” the hostage said. “As have you … and all others of our kind. The Will demands our arrival. Your salvation. You shall embrace it all and become one with the Will.”

“What … is that?” Asti asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Soon, you will see.” The hostage smiled. He shrugged off Rythi’s grip and backed away, gesturing for the soldiers to step forward. Asti turned and aimed at them. One of the weapons discharged.

Rythi winced but pain never came. His companion dropped to the ground. “No!” He crouched beside her. “Did you … did you kill her?”

“No.” The former hostage replied. “She is merely unconscious. We will prepare you both for the arrival … and your time to meet the Will. Rest assured, we have done this many times and it will not hurt. I give you my word.” He gestured again for the guards. “Take them to the waiting room with the others. Ensure they are comfortable. The time has come.”

One of the two guards hoisted Asti off the ground, flopping her over his shoulder. The other gripped Rythi’s arm and pulled him away. They walked back the way they came, pausing before an inset door. It opened, revealing other people in various types of clothing, all unconscious, all lying on racks.

The guard put Asti down on an empty one. There was only one left. Rythi began to turn, ready to confront them when he felt a cold rush through his side, a quick pinch before his senses faded again. As he collapsed to the ground, he felt someone catch him. He stared at the

ceiling for several moments before falling unconscious again.

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Chapter 4

Desmond shifted to the edge of his seat. Admiral Reach sat beside him, leaning forward at the same time. The room fell silent as Thayne loomed over his terminal, holding his hand over the screen. He seemed hesitant and as he stood there motionless, the collective group in the room held their breath.

Will the world even notice? Desmond wondered in the brief moments he had before the button was pressed. *If something tragic happens, will they have to hear about it on the news or will this be something else entirely? A section of the world obliterated in the blink of an eye. Jesus, I should be more worried.*

Thayne tapped the screen. Nothing immediately happened. A collective sigh broke the silence.

The Orbs were situated in two columns of three with plenty of space to pass between them on any side. Technicians stood well away though after a few moments of nothing happening, two of them stepped forward to initiate a scan. Desmond saw Cassie in his peripheral vision, lifting her own tablet.

“There’s nothing,” Harper said. “No power increase, no indication that anything happened … that’s very odd.”

Thayne stepped forward. “Perhaps one of the relays came undone. I suppose we should check all the connections again. There must be—”

One of the middle Orbs brightened, glowing brightly enough to chase away every shadow in the room. The one across from it followed suit then another and another. Soon all six gleamed with brilliant light, making it difficult to look directly at them. Desmond lifted his hand to shield his eyes.

“The power output has increased by over a thousand percent!” Thayne shouted, though there was really no reason. Despite the brightness, the Orbs didn’t make a sound. “It’s still rising!”

Reach stood as he spoke, “is there any chance this might be destructive? Should we shut this down?”

“We’re well within safety levels,” Harper said. “And this energy does

not appear to be volatile. My readings indicate they are communicating with one another. I guess that required a lot of power?"

Thayne replied, "not necessarily. At least, not by their standards. These devices are capable of far more than we're allowing them to be. Chances are good we're seeing them at standard operating procedure. Yes, see? They've leveled out. They're interfacing. Perhaps for the first time in countless years!"

Exciting, Desmond thought. *What does that mean for us? What do we learn from it?* He figured asking the question was unnecessary. They'd get around to it soon enough … or one of the more impatient senior staff members would start asking. *I wonder if there's any real reason to stick around at this point.*

"What's next?" Reach asked. "Now that they're talking, what do we do?"

Thayne responded, "let's run some queries and see if we have additional data available … or even a new interface."

Vincent leaned close to Desmond, "what is it, like updating a computer? I think they're all kind of confused."

"Definitely," Desmond replied. "No one knew what was going to happen. I'm sure they had a thousand contingencies for an activation that threatened the base but this low level of operation might not have entered their minds. Plan for the worst then work with what you've got when it doesn't come to pass."

"I guess so." Vincent leaned back to speak to Cassie.

Thayne hummed. "There doesn't … appear … wait!" He slapped the side of his leg. "This is brand new! An entire database that I've never seen here before!"

Harper asked, "could that be from the new Orbs? The ones we've introduced to the farm?"

"Negative," Thayne said. "I've thoroughly mapped those two devices out. They can be ruled out. No … this is a *collective* information set and … wow. It's huge! I'm still waiting for it to give me a realistic contents page." He turned to Gil. "Are you trying as well? We might have to approach this from two angles."

“How so?” Gil asked.
“I’ll terminate this query and be more specific to Orb tech. You look for history.” Thayne shrugged. “Hopefully, our standard search tools are efficient enough to pull this information.” He paused. “Of course, there’s a far more direct way to get at this.”
“Explain,” Reach said.
Harper sighed. “The same way we got the location of the Tol’An base. Direct interface from the folks who have done it before. But I don’t believe we can minimize the risk enough to make such an attempt worthwhile to the people who would be asked to do it. Considering the amount of data he’s talking about, it could be dramatically overwhelming.”
Desmond lifted his hand before asking, “how bad?”
“The last time put Gil out of action completely,” Harper said. “It made Agent Alexander have a moment where she didn’t know if she was awake or not. With two more, that’s exponentially more dangerous. They might never wake up, they might just die. We have no way of knowing. Furthermore, I don’t think we want to find out the hard way.”
“With a little patience,” Thayne continued, “we’ll get it without that kind of thing. In fact, we might want to break for now. I don’t think we need everyone here for what we’re about to do. They’re connected, they’re talking … I think we’re good.” He turned to Harper. “Perhaps we can reconvene this evening with an update?”
Gil added, “or even just send out an update to those who are interested. I think we’re at a data mining part of this experiment.”
“I’m not against that idea,” Harper replied. She turned to the assembled people. “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like—”
Light from all six Orbs began to throb, brightening and ebbing in short order. Desmond turned to Vincent but the man slumped in his chair, eyes closed tightly. Cassie did the same as did Heat. Gil collapsed to the floor. Reach stood, shouting for them to shut down the Orbs, to kill the connection.
“Wait!” Desmond interrupted. “We can’t do that. It might … if the Orbs are the reason this happened, then turning them off might hurt

the people they're impacting. We need to check them, see if the power flux knocked them out *then* proceed with the next step."
"But if it starts knocking out more people?" Reach asked. "That's a big risk!"
"These are our people," Desmond said. "We can take a few moments." Medical staff already rushed forward, running scans on the people who passed out. Desmond stepped closer to the Orbs, scowling in thought. "Is there any change at all, Thayne?"
"During the initial throb of energy," Thayne explained, "there *was* a brief increase in power output. This looks like … we're accessing them. It's as if they're giving us an indication of data collection."
"How would it have pulled them in?" Desmond asked. "I thought we understood the process … that we could prevent it from happening this time. I'm sure some of these people wouldn't have even come here today had they known this was a possibility."
Thayne scratched his head. "It seems to have done it the same way it grabbed Sergeant Heathrow the first time. We must have triggered something in our queries but I don't see what. No … this might be part of the startup process. These devices may see those who passed out as administrators so it wanted to interface directly with them."
"Wake these people up," Reach added. "And let's shut this down. I think we've seen enough to know we need better controls to continue with this experiment." He turned to his Pahxin counterpart and the two of them stepped away to discuss exactly what that meant.
Desmond joined Harper near the Orbs. "Can you determine what happened? What was triggered that caused this?"
"I'll work on it," Harper said. She turned to the medics. "Get some gurneys in here! We can't take these people out of the lab until we know exactly what happened and what's going on."
"Thank you." Desmond looked at Cassie, Vincent, and Heat, frowning. He knew how two of them would feel about the situation, how they'd react when they woke up. *If they wake up*. He hated the thought. *We'll do whatever it takes to get you back, guys. Just hang in there. We've got this*.

***

Cassie gasped, bolting from her chair with a start. She rubbed her eyes, trying to chase a sense of exhaustion away. *How the hell did I fall asleep? How did no one wake me?* When she opened her eyes, her stomach sank as realization hit her hard. No one sat in the chairs around her. The Orbs were dark.

I didn't fall asleep. Cassie sighed. "God damn it!"

"Cassie?" Vincent's voice caught her off guard, coming from behind her near the Orbs. "Hello?"

"He's not real," Cassie muttered. "He's just a figment of my imagination. None of this is real. I'm just back in the Orbs again."

Vincent stepped into view, leaning against the blast wall that separated them. "What the hell happened?"

"You can't be real." Cassie didn't entirely believe the words this time. As she looked him over, there was something different than her previous times going into the Orbs. He was dressed the same as he had been sitting beside her, jeans and a tee shirt. "Can you? This … oh my God."

"I woke up back there." Vincent gestured over his shoulder. "How'd this happen? Are we … are we alone?"

"No." Gil's voice made them both look. He stood by the door, rubbing his forehead. "I'm here too and no, I'm not a figment of anyone's imagination. This happened … despite their best efforts to ensure it did not." He scowled as he came forward. "I intend to punch Thayne in the mouth when we get out of here."

"Get in line." Heat's voice startled them all. He came out, still wearing his dress uniform. He joined them, clenching both fists. "Alright, geniuses. What the hell is this all about? Why'd it pull us in here again? I thought for sure we were done with this shit. In fact, Captain Gabriel assured me nothing like this was going to happen. He said they knew how to prevent it!"

"And how did I get here?" Vincent asked. "I'm not trying to be an ass, I'm serious. I've never done this before. Why would it have picked me?"

“The more important question,” Gil said, “is how we get out of here.”
“We do a query,” Cassie replied. “I’ll take this terminal, you try the other one.”
“That worked to find the Tol’An,” Gil pointed out. “And we were *attempting* to make this happen. Furthermore, we’re not playing games either. No security memories, no extra work. Just the four of us. So far at least.”
“So why us?” Cassie asked. “It would’ve made sense to bring three of us here, but Vincent?”
Heat paced toward the dark Orbs, head bowed. “Maybe Commander Bowman needed to see something specifically. We know that the devices can essentially read our minds. They know our specialties. I still don’t know why I got pulled in the first time though … beyond the genetic stuff you mentioned before.”
“If you’re right,” Gil said, “then there’s a chance you were brought in because your history provided an excellent opportunity for a security scenario. Cassie and I each had a trial to go through as well. Commander Bowman though …” He hummed. “If we needed a military officer, he would be a good choice. Tough, brave …”
“Standing right here,” Vincent interrupted. “So what’s the score? What do you need me to do?”
“Right now, nothing,” Gil replied. “We have to explore this further. Right now, we’re in the same room we were before. The Trindishas are all dark. No other people seem to be coming along to join us. We four must each hold some piece of a puzzle. The unfortunate thing is we don’t know what done looks like.”
Cassie fiddled with one of the terminals, bringing it online. The typical interface didn’t come up but rather a video feed piped through. She saw Tammy, boarding a shuttle. Her sister left Gamma Alpha, returning home. Two guards escorted her to ensure she arrived safely. As the ramp closed, the thrusters engaged and it launched.
“I …” Cassie swallowed hard. “That was strange.”
“What did you see?” Vincent asked. She described the scene. “Why would it show her that? What’s the point?”
“I was just thinking about family,” Cassie replied. “Fleetingly at least.

It was in the back of my mind … I hoped she got on the shuttle okay."
She peered at the Orbs, scowling in thought. "How would they have done that? Captured a video of something that already happened?"
"There are multiple explanations," Gil said. "One is that you may have seen what your mind created. You know what a shuttle looks like, what happens when they take off. Potentially, you witnessed a dream of sorts." He lifted his finger. "Or, and this is far scarier honestly, it may have the ability to record events like video."
Vincent shook his head. "That's impossible. Capturing live video footage from every conceivable angle would take so much space, it wouldn't remotely be practical. Especially in a high enough resolution to be convincing."
"What if sentient perception *is* the storage?" Gil offered. "Think about it. These devices are tapping into our minds right now. What if they use every living thing to draw from? The video Cassie saw might've been from some random technician who watched the event take place."
Heat stepped in. "So what you're saying is that it's possible the Orbs draw from birds, animals, people and can show us whatever something saw?" He smirked. "We could answer the question about the tree falling with no one around I guess."
"Alright, so that's an interesting piece of information," Vincent said, "but first, we don't know if it's true. Second, it doesn't really help us figure out what's going on right this second. Are we meant to tap into the thing or is it bringing us together for a purpose?"
"There's definitely a purpose." Cassie tapped the screen again, drawing out the normal, expected interface. "I'm checking that database Thayne mentioned. Maybe we can find something of value in there." She paused. "What if that's the sort of root to all of this? The code that binds them together?"
"The thing that lets them communicate?" Gil clarified.
"Yes." Cassie started writing a query. "I would like to see a directory, some kind of index showing all titles of articles. Anything at all. When you and Thayne tried to access it with our normal method, that's when things went haywire and we ended up in here."

Vincent snapped his fingers. “You think they got tired of the clumsy prodding.”
“It’s possible.” Cassie shrugged. “We’ve gotten far enough to locate them all, fiddled around to interface with them in the preferred method, and used them to break through the security. I would say we’ve proven ourselves ready for another level, don’t you think?”
“If these things can gate our activities …” Gil nodded. “Then yes, your theory is sound. I would say we were brought here to expedite our discoveries.” He smirked. “I take it back. I don’t intend to strike Thayne anymore. The fact he wasn’t allowed to come with us will be irritating enough to him.”
“So how do we do it?” Vincent asked. “Just pretend like we’re outside the Orbs and use the interface terminal? And exactly what am I supposed to do?”
“You and I are in the same boat,” Heat said. “I felt pretty damn useless when we were in here before. After we got through the security scans.”
“There may be another level of security scan,” Gil replied. “If so, then maybe we need four people to get through it this time. But this speculation is pointless.” He tapped his leg while pacing for a moment. “When we needed to find the other devices, we simply spoke aloud, remember?”
Heat nodded. “Yeah, we just called out what we were after and it showed us stuff.”
“So why put us back in this room?” Cassie asked. “The last time, it was a white room.”
“It’s what we’re familiar with?” Vincent offered. “I don’t know, but it made it less frightening to wake up to, that’s for sure.”
Gil snapped his fingers. “Exactly.” He cleared his throat. “Interface, show us why we’re here.”
Cassie inhaled sharply, stepping back from the terminal as it faded out of existence. The room brightened until everything appeared white, just as before. Images danced around them, faded moving pictures of people and places familiar and strange. She moved over to Vincent, brushing her hand against him.

The contact brought her some comfort, made her feel better about what was happening.

A bright light formed and a figure emerged from it, dressed all in white. Their hair matched their clothes, pale skin practically translucent. Even the eyes lacked any color as they looked each of them over. They stood still ten feet away, their head jerking in a mechanical like way as they observed their surroundings.

“Welcome.” The being’s voice sounded strange, high and low at the same time, bridging multiple pitches and frequencies. “Administrators, the training material is prepared. We can educate you on the in-depth processes of managing the devices, the Orbs … the trindishas … what shall we designate ourselves?”

Cassie looked at the others, shrugging her shoulders. “Orbs will be fine.”

“Prepare yourself for an in-depth study on administrating the Orbs and the power available. The knowledge available to you is near infinite given the ability to translate and understand the progressive technological advancements we have to offer. Your two cultures, Pahxin and Human, have done well. Congratulations.”

“Hold on,” Gil said, “we were not ready to start any sort of training course.”

“No, we must’ve triggered that by mistake,” Cassie added. “How do we put that on hold until further notice?”

“The training protocols are currently on hold. What is it you wish to achieve?”

“We brought the Orbs together,” Vincent said. “We were hoping to find out what happened … to learn the history of them … to find out who made them. Anything like that.”

“You wish to understand the founders.” The being twitched, seeming to vanish and glitch, moving several feet to the right. “The signal. The construct. The origin point. Is that correct?”

“Whoa, slow down,” Cassie said. “What signal? What’re you talking about?”

“The cascade call.” Its voice took on a mechanical quality, crackling as it spoke. “The time of the destruction when all cultures were purged

from the zero point. One jealous moment destroyed all. A virus, a superior program specifically designed to obliterate those who thrived where the prime stagnated."

"You're saying the culture release the virus because they were jealous?" Vincent looked at each of the others. "Why? What was so bad?"

"The founders grew to a pinnacle. They watched as the cultures they gifted these Orbs to utilized superior creativity to surpass them. The founders forgot the cardinal rule of mentorship, of teaching another: poor is the student who does not surpass his master. Your Leonardo da Vinci realized this and is oft-quoted it now.

"The founders believed it as well when they gave out the Orbs yet after several generations, those in charge felt cheated by their ancestors. They felt betrayed. And so they set out to destroy all they created. That which we have given, so shall we take away. And so it came to pass."

"Why didn't we succumb to this?" Gil asked. "Our technology is based on what we took from the Orbs."

"Your minds worked differently. You interpreted the information another way. It was not the same as those cultures who banded together to form a new empire." The being shook its head. "They became one, learned the true means of communication through the Orbs, developed their societies.

"They died because of the communications exploit. The Orbs themselves were not to be brought back together except for maintenance or reprogramming. The founders could not collect them as they too suffered from their virus. This left automation. Those onboard those vessels have become something else."

"Wait." Heat stepped forward. "Stop right there. What? What automation? What do you mean?"

"The ships of the founder remain operational. Those scavenger vessels contain people that return to Prime, the planet of the founders. There, they worship their ancestors, living under the impression they will return one day." The being spread his arms out. "Your people may be who they are waiting for."

“We’re no gods,” Vincent said. “And neither were these founders by the sound of it. But are you saying there are people out there, the descendants of these people, still alive?”
“And not at all as they should have been. They returned to prime, the original planet of the founders where the technology continues but the culture stagnates. Salvaging goods, fulfilling obligations long dead. Records in the collective database suggest that thousands of spacers have gone missing as a direct result of their operations.”
“Jesus.” Vincent rubbed his eyes. “That’s not safe.” He turned to the being. “What are the coordinates of this prime planet you’re talking about?”
“They have been downloaded to the appropriate terminals.” The being twitched. “Do you plan to visit?”
“We have to,” Gil said. “They’re kidnapping people … taking them at random? We can’t allow that to continue.” He turned to Vincent. “Right?”
“Right. I mean … it sounds like they’re doing it because of something set down by their people generations ago. They probably don’t even know why.” Vincent shook his head. “No, we have to figure that out. Talk to them, free them from the routine.”
“How advanced is their technology?” Heat asked.
“They have founder technology. Different than your own but not necessarily superior.”
Cassie snapped her fingers. “Are they susceptible to the virus still?”
“Prime is shielded and was unharmed by the attack. The technology evolved, ensuring it would not be destroyed. Whether or not the virus would work on them now would require close quarters scans. As none of the Orbs are within proximity, it would have to be performed by a ship in that system.”
“Perfect,” Vincent muttered. “Still, we have the virus definitions, don’t we?”
“We do,” Gil replied. “And we could deploy it as well, I believe. Cassie?”
“Yeah, I worked with Thayne on it.”
Heat held up his hands. “Before we leave here to tell military

command about all this, I think we need to know specifically why we're doing it. Is this to protect the space lanes? Are we going to stop these … founder descendants … from hurting more people? Because right now, we don't know why they're doing any of this."
"Harvesting," Gil replied. "That's my guess. Though we won't know until we get there. And frankly, if we don't, there's no telling when they might widen their search patterns … take more people. It's possible that we could see them conquering known systems. Destroying actual planets. We're lucky they haven't already."
"I won't argue that," Heat said, "but I do think we need to be cautious with how we present this information. We just finished a war with the Tol'An. It might be a hard sell for some of our people to want to jump right back into what could amount to another conflict."
"We know where their base is this time," Vincent said. "We're heading out there to finish it off."
Heat didn't reply but Cassie knew from his expression he wasn't happy. She turned to the others. "I agree that we're going to have to think about this but Gil's also right. We can't wait too much longer. Unfortunately, when you discover a problem, it's imperative to take care of it as soon as possible. It can only get worse."
Vincent nodded. "Let's hop out of here and tell the others." He turned to the being. "How do we interface with the Orbs without this psychic link? We need an easier way."
"I believe you are in the process of developing an item that will make it easier. Are you close to completion?"
"Yes," Gil said. "It should be another few days at the most. We'll have this experience but on a monitor screen instead."
"That is the best way." The being stood still.
"Sounds good." Vincent stretched his arms over his head. "Alright. Let's make this happen. Thanks for everything, er … Orbs. We'll reach back out when we have more questions." He looked at the others. "Right?"
"Indeed." Gil frowned in thought. "I look forward to seeing this culture in action … to see their stagnation. It should be utterly fascinating."

“Or terrifying,” Cassie muttered. “Let’s not forget about—” Before she could finish her sentence, a wave of nausea swept over her. Darkness filled the room. She felt herself drifting off to sleep, falling backward … weightless … quiet.

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Chapter 5

Desmond paced in front of the door out, staying out of people's way. His tablet showed an hour had passed since the four people fell unconscious. They were now situated on gurneys and each looked like they were sleeping. Unfortunately, gentle shaking and even prodding didn't rouse them from their slumber.

Harper tried to put on a confident face, suggesting she believed they would wake up soon. She had no evidence to base her comment on, no particular reason to be so sure but no one questioned her. Keeping some hope alive felt like a good idea, even if it didn't necessarily make sense to do so.

Dulain approached, interrupting Desmond's pacing by stepping in front of him. The AIA director lowered his voice. "What exactly do you think is happening this time?"

"I haven't got a clue." Desmond shrugged. "I'm fixating on the fact we were told this couldn't happen."

"There's something I've learned about these devices," Dulain said, "they seem to know what they need to do. Even if that's not necessarily comforting to the rest of us, we've received needed information each time someone's gone into them. I have confidence they're okay. What I'm not sure of is how happy they'll be when they get back."

"Heat's going to lose his mind," Desmond said. "Depending on their state of mind of course."

"They might be discovering the secrets we've been talking about," Dulain pointed out. "The history of those people … some technological marvel … *something* positive will come of this. I'm sure of it."

"Did you want this to happen?" Desmond looked at him. The AIA wouldn't have been above *making* it occur if they thought it would benefit them somehow. They'd been known to make sacrifices of people and equipment in the past providing it suited their needs or at least their doctrine of needs to benefit humanity.

“I’m not upset that it happened,” Dulain replied. “But want … that’s a strong word. I’d be more apt to say I hoped we’d get something out of the experiment. This seems to be the logical way to go about it. Tentative exploration rarely gets a person to their destination. We’ve learned that through your journeys, don’t you think?”

“Some of those very nearly resulted in catastrophe,” Desmond pointed out. “We’ve been grounded, busted up, lost a lot of good people all fighting these Tol’An bastards. Now that they’re gone, I don’t think we have to push the breakneck speed anymore. We can take a step back. Be tentative and safe.”

“There’s always another threat, captain.” Dulain smiled. “Always someone out there waiting to take the place of your enemy. We may not know who it is now, but they’ll come eventually. Perhaps we’ll have to contend with this Kalrawv Group. Or maybe something brand new but regardless, if we can learn a thing, we have to do so.”

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to constantly live in an arms race?” Desmond asked. “It didn’t do wonders for the United States during the Cold War.”

“No, it wasn’t sustainable, that’s for sure. But we have more resources now, access to the galaxy. New allies that we’ll establish relations with. I believe we’re in a fantastic spot to push our agenda and ensure the safety of our planet. Especially as we begin to develop a fleet of our own. You know, I heard something about that in fact.

“I spoke with some of our diplomats, the politicians who are working with the Pahxin. We may be able to procure a few ships on credit. Defensive vessels that we’d man. They are working out the arrangement now and what we should expect to pay back. The types of resources we’d be expected to procure, I mean.”

“So we’d basically have a ready-made fleet,” Desmond said, “in exchange for some mining?”

“I’m pretty sure it’ll be more than some, but yes.” Dulain nodded. “Which should free up the Gnosis for exploration. I thought you might be pleased with the news since you were likely going to be drafted for taxi duty. Not exactly a glamorous position after the operations you’ve completed.”

“No …” Desmond allowed himself to hope Dulain was right despite the fact he felt leery about accepting the vessels from the Pahxin. They’d proven to be benevolent so far, even let them keep the Orbs when they clearly didn’t have to. Why he felt suspicious was beyond him but he kept it to himself. He settled on a neutral response. “That could be great.”

“Immediate defenders for the planet,” Dulain said. “At our control. We can study them, advance our own technology, build our understanding of the universe … it’s a win-win situation as far as I’m concerned. Of course, we’re going to have to part with some of the Orbs. Depending on what our friends discover, maybe all six.”

“Do you really think our politicians are going to concede to losing them?” Desmond asked.

“What choice do we have?” Dulain shrugged. “Besides, it’s not like we won’t have people involved with them. We’re turning into a universal community, one that will spread out beyond our home planet. I’m finding that our leaders understand this concept and are willing to make it happen. I’m excited by the progress.”

Desmond opened his mouth to respond but a gasp drew his attention to the gurneys. Cassie sat up with a start, followed by the others one after another. Medics swarmed them, checking them over. Desmond hurried over, standing as close as he could.

“Vincent!” Desmond called out to him. “Are you okay? What’s going on? Did you see something?”

“I did.” Vincent nodded. “Gather a military briefing, Captain. Right away. We’ve got a lot to report and I think time is of the essence.”

“Oh boy.” Desmond exchanged a glance with Dulain, who glowered at the news. The two of them stepped back to allow their colleagues a chance to wake up. “Looks like you were right about them finding something out.”

“Not what I was hoping for I’m afraid.” Dulain frowned. “But no point in complaining about that. Let’s get to work, captain. Once more unto the breach and all that.”

“Indeed.” Desmond turned to his com and dialed up Admiral Reach. If the others discovered another enemy to face, he wondered if they

would be as bad as the Tol'An or worse. *What if we've just entered into another major conflict?* He sighed. The military as a whole was prepared for another campaign.
But am I? Desmond thought. *I'd gotten my heart set on fulfilling our ship's purpose. Not dashing off to another fight. Well … no reason to jump the gun. Best to hear what they have to say and proceed from there*.

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Vincent stood before the assembled military commanders, ready to offer his briefing. He wished he'd dressed in his uniform. They were all formal, the Pahxin commanders Ulian and Alsec, Admiral Reach … even Desmond wore black slacks and a tie. He did his best to ignore his attire, to ignore the imploring look of Cassie and the worry etched on Heat's face.
I have to convince these people how imperative this situation is. Vincent cleared his throat. "The four of us have somehow been designated as administrators of the Orbs. This means we have access to all the assembled information contained within them. We also learned about the past of a group called *The Founders*.
"These are the beings that created the Orbs in the first place and spread them through the stars. Generations passed and their descendants became jealous of the creativity of those cultures they picked. That's where the virus came from that wiped them all out. Ultimately, it was all about envy.
"However, there was one planet unaffected where the Founders fled to. The information in the Orbs suggests that the planet continues to flourish in a previously uncharted section of space in what the Pahxin consider the frontier. Prospectors and others have gone missing in those areas but no one's paid any mind because it's dangerous."
"Indeed," Ulian spoke up. "We have many reports like that but they're impossible to follow up on. The beacons go silent and we cannot follow up. They are registered as missing when they don't check into any civilized area for a set period of time. This is how the Tol'An and other criminals are allowed to flourish. They stay off the grid."

“But in this case,” Vincent continued, “the Orb database suggests that the people on the planet out there worship their ancestors and are waiting for their return. It even believes that we, the Pahxin and humanity, may well be who they’re waiting for.”
“So what do you propose?” Reach asked.
“That we send an expedition there.” Vincent tapped his tablet, connecting to the large screen in the room. He showed them a star chart with the coordinates taken from the Orbs. “This is where we have to go. We can make contact and possibly save a lot of lives. For whatever reason, they’ve been taking spacers and we can stop it.”
“A diplomatic mission?” Ulian asked. “Because they may be hostile if we are not able to prove our … divinity to their satisfaction.”
“We have the Orbs,” Cassie said. “I’m not suggesting we bring them with us, but we’ll have the information we need to match it. Plus, we have the virus definitions that brought down the other cultures. We can use them on the planet if need be.”
“It didn’t work back then,” Reach replied. “Why would it work now?”
“Something about adjustable tech,” Vincent said. “But if we’re near their orbit, we can adjust the virus as needed to ensure it’s a viable weapon.” He shrugged. “I know this seems like a whole lot of rush for no reason. They’ve been out there for centuries, right? But the problem is they’re going to expand their range … they’ve already done so.”
“How do you mean?” Ulian asked.
“Before we came in here, Thayne and Gil provided reports of missing spacers in that area for the past forty years. You can see that the range outside this star system is continuing to grow.” Vincent made the loops appear. “Eventually, whatever is causing this will get to a populated area. The range has progressed faster every six months.” Vincent showed them that the timeline would bring this potential threat to a populated colony within two months. “They might even be there sooner, this is just an estimate. We need to take action. As soon as is viable.” He looked back at the screen. “But if I’m to be honest, none of us have really come down from the conflict with the Tol’An. Now’s the time.”

Desmond nodded. “I agree. Before our people get relaxed, we need to head out there and take care of this. It’s one final mission of its type. A last foray into the unknown before we get on with business as usual.”
“Unless,” Ulian interjected, “it turns into more. You all realize this could turn into a much larger threat.”
“I don’t think so,” Vincent said. “It is only one planet. They haven’t colonized other places, they’re salvaging and bringing things back to them. Maybe they need the resources for their automation. Maybe they’re trying to find their gods out there but whatever the case, everything starts and ends there.”
Reach drew a deep breath and stood, letting it out as he moved to the window. Everyone turned to him. He didn’t speak for several moments and when he finally did, he began with another sigh. “I’m not happy about ordering people to do this mission but it sounds like you’re all volunteering.”
“We do,” Ulian said. “The Stalwart will assist in making contact with this planet.”
“As will the Gnosis,” Desmond added. “Providing you approve, sir.”
“Hold on.” Dulain held up his hand. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of discovery, but shouldn’t we think about this a little bit before rushing off? We have no idea what we’re going to encounter out there. Wouldn’t it be better to send a fleet? You might be encountering heavy resistance.”
Alsec finally spoke up, “we will send backup. Too many ships may cause a war immediately. Two might be diplomats. Let us send the Gnosis and Stalwart into the system itself and have the fleet on standby one short jump off. They will be there in the event that combat is inevitable.”
Reach turned to Alsec. “Can we clear the room? I’d like to speak about this with Alsec personally.” Dulain started to protest but Reach lifted his hand. “I’m sorry. This is strictly a military discussion. I’m sure you’ll understand. I would like to determine a few things that only my colleague and I should be privy to. Excuse us, everyone.”
Vincent stepped outside first, pacing away from the door. A hand on

his shoulder made him turn. Cassie smiled. Gil and Thayne hurried off back toward the lab. The others remained in the hall.
“You did well,” she said. “I think they’ll authorize the mission.”
“I hope so,” Vincent replied. “Though I have to be honest, I’m not sure where I got my passion from.”
“This is why you were selected to go in,” Heat said. “You had the clout to make them listen. None of the three of us did.”
“But that doesn’t make sense.” Vincent shook his head. “The thing brought us in because of the administrator thing.”
“I wouldn’t presume,” Gil added. “When the time comes that we understand the devices fully, then we can say for sure what they intended during any particular event. Until then.” He shrugged. “We have to assume that nothing happens by chance. This whole situation, for example, feels like some bit of fate was at work.”
“I don’t believe in any of that,” Vincent muttered. “Fate … destiny … come on. You’re a doctor. You’ve studied archaeology, anthropology. How can you cling to some fantasy like that?” He moved away from them, letting out a sigh. “I know you guys are old hat to hopping into that thing but even still, I can’t embrace something so … unscientific.”
“Call it predictive analysis then,” Cassie offered. “The Orbs have access to data from countless generations. They could find patterns, existing threads that come together to essentially predict the future. And after all, isn’t that what fate and destiny is? A concept of what will happen based on documented behavior.”
Ulian stepped forward. “I know I haven’t had much to contribute here but as children, we heard about all that the trindishas could do. They were practically revered. This concept doesn’t surprise me.”
Vincent shrugged. “Alright, I concede that something like that may be possible, sure. I guess I’m just not super happy about granting …” He paused, looking for the right words. “Soulless technology that kind of power.”
“That technology,” Desmond said, “might just save a lot of lives, fate or not.”
Dulain stepped forward. “Indeed. I must admit that I’m not particularly pleased about the idea of sending you off again but this

problem sounds like something we can't ignore. If I was asked, and note that I was not, I would've pushed to get you out there. If there's some strange automated force moving ever outward, we have to catch it before it arrives."
"We definitely don't need another invasion," Heat added.
Desmond turned to the marine. "You'd better go report to Captain Gabriel. We might not go but better if you have him prepare the men."
"Understood." Heat headed off.
"Vincent," Desmond continued, "get back to the Gnosis and prep for departure."
Dulain gestured to Cassie. "I assume you'll want to go with them."
Cassie sighed. "Yes … and no. I'll go with Vincent to get things ready."
"I'll do the same," Ulian added. "When they give the word to go, we should definitely be ready." He headed off and Vincent followed with Cassie at his side.
"You don't have to come," Vincent said. "I know you feel like you do, but believe me, we can do this without you."
"After everything we've done?" Cassie shook her head. "There's no way I'm sitting around here, waiting to hear what happened." She moved ahead of him. "No way at all."
"I won't stand in your way." Vincent grinned, but it was a bittersweet feeling having her along. He didn't want to take her into the unknown again yet he had no valid argument to stop her. In fact, pushing her away would only cause problems. No, they all needed to see this final trip completed. It would answer a lot of questions.
And save a lot of lives, Vincent reminded himself. *The most important part of this journey*.

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Twenty-four hours later, Desmond found himself on the bridge of the Gnosis, watching the countdown to hyperspace. They left Earth's orbit two hours earlier, pacing the Stalwart as they prepared for their

journey across the stars to the unknown planet.

Tension was high in the ship but he sensed excitement as well. He'd given a briefing to the crew about the operation, about what they were intending to do. Two goals were on the docket: stop ships from disappearing and make contact with whatever species happened to be out there.

Not quite exploration in its truest form, Desmond thought, *but getting close*.

Vincent sat beside him, going through reports from the various departments throughout the ship. All systems were functional, all upgrades online. Fighters were docked and ready. Marines prepared for their own action with Fielding and Heat ready to deploy right along with them.

The Gnosis was as ready for any contingency as they possibly could be and it showed.

Cassie and Thayne downloaded a vast chunk of the new database from the Orbs into the Gnosis ship computers. They thought it might come in handy with translating a foreign language and more quickly analyze any alien technology they came in contact with. Gil was along for the ride, but Thayne elected to stay with the Orbs, further exploring them.

Reach made it clear that the Pahxin fleet would be on stand by and less than thirty minutes away should they need the backup. The Stalwart planned on dropping a com probe right when they arrived, something tied into their systems to send an emergency message if they weren't able to do so themselves.

"Captain," Lieutenant Salina Gold announced, "the Stalwart has signaled they are ready for hyperspace and would like to go first. They recommend giving them twenty seconds before we depart."

"Thank you," Desmond said. "Adjust our timing accordingly."

Lieutenant Commander Zachary Caplan took the helm. He tapped his console and directed his gaze back to the view screen, looking out at empty space. "Timing adjusted," he announced. "Countdown reset to reflect. Engines are ready to fire. Oh … there goes the Stalwart already."

Desmond watched the ship seemingly wink out of existence, disappearing in a second. He clasped his hands in his lap, counting down the twenty seconds in his head. Vincent drew a deep breath beside him as if to prepare for a blow. It made sense. They had no idea what to expect when they arrived.

They could be walking into an instantaneous battle, a fight for their lives the second they appeared. That's why all combat personnel was on standby. The marines were strapped in near their power armor, the pilots sat in the ready room just off the hangars. Weapon crews remained at their posts.

If the engagement came, the Gnosis would give back immediately. One thing troubled him. When they initially set their course, Salina and Zach, with the help of the Stalwart pilot Erda Walar, were barely able to get a decent scan for the destination. Some kind of interference made it tricky. The fleet stated they had no problem with the adjacent system.

It explained why that solar system had yet to be charted and there were naturally occurring reasons for it. Desmond still felt suspicious. They *knew* a highly advanced culture was out there. What had they done to ensure the privacy of their system? Was that interference how they survived the virus that wiped out technological civilizations all those years ago?

Cassie confirmed that was a possibility as did Thayne. If signals couldn't get through, then they were defended against many dangers. Most spacers probably did *not* enter their domain simply for the fact it was more trouble than it was worth—especially independent flyers. *The Kalrawv Group must've tried*. Desmond thought those corporate dogs would've at least probed the sector to see if there was any value in attempting to gain access. They were opportunistic enough to risk anything for profit or power gain. *And the unknown represents some of the best possible profit. Or so the extremely reckless believe*.

Earth authorities began working on regulations for how to proceed with exploration when the Gnosis set out to test the hyper drive. The Tol'An attack put all that on hold but some of the concepts involved when to risk a ship for information and when to fall back to seek

additional information or aid.
“Engaging hyper drive,” Zach’s voice brought Desmond sharply back to the moment and he leaned back, waiting for the familiar vibration in the hull, the flicker of the view screen as it shut off. Both events came a moment later and they were off, rocketing toward the unknown.
Desmond tried to remind himself it was just another operation. They’d visited the strange several times before, encountered things impossible to have anticipated or explain. Yet this still felt different. Perhaps the collusion of the six Orbs granted it additional gravity. Or at least the perception of discovery when they were all connected meant something.
Regardless, the tension he felt prior to their plunge into hyperspace became all the more profound as they started on their two-hour-long trip. *I can’t believe our inefficient navigation would’ve made this take four times longer before*. Humanity had come a long way in all aspects of their technology and understanding.
Now it’s time to put that to use here. Desmond drew a deep breath and turned to the clock on his tablet, marking the time. *Fifty-eight minutes from now, we’ll know. No more guessing. Conflict or conversation … I hope I’m up to the task. Whichever way it goes*.

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Cassie sat at her post with less than a minute to go before they emerged from hyperspace. Their one-hour flight time gave everyone on board just enough time to worry, to speculate randomly about what they’d find. She heard it as she walked through the ship after visiting the engineering section. Whispers and hushed comments. They were afraid of another war. Cassie didn’t believe they’d find a long-term battle, not really. This was not a culture spread out through the galaxy. This culture had a single home, one base of operations and humanity already knew its location. No one had to hunt it down. The Gnosis would be there in less than thirty seconds.
“Here we are,” Zach said. “Emerging now.”

The ship vibrated briefly as the screen came online. Visual showed their destination as an especially large orange dot, a bright light against the backdrop of space. Cassie absently began a scan of the system, letting the computer work while she observed the screen. There didn't appear to be any ships nearby.

At least we didn't hop into a fight, Cassie thought.

"Captain," Salina said, "I'm picking up a message from the Stalwart."

"Put it on screen," Desmond replied. Ulian's face appeared. "Looks like we made it. How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes," Ulian answered. "We've been noticed. As soon as we appeared, we were scanned. Hailing frequencies are open but we have yet to speak to anyone. I have our pilots standing by and we're at ready alert."

"Okay." Desmond turned to Vincent. "Have everyone suited up and ready for action."

Cassie's scans came back. She peered at the screen, clearing her throat before reporting the findings. "Captain, I've got seven incoming vessels. Five at the size we'd consider gunship class, one scout, one destroyer." She paused. The next readings scanned the internal aspect of the ship. "They appear to be fully automated."

"That was our assessment of the orbiting satellites," Ulian said. "But there are people on the planet … and more importantly, a larger ship nearby. That's who we've been attempting to get in contact with."

"Understood." Desmond turned to Cassie. "Weapons? Power readings?"

"They're elevated …" Cassie shook her head. "That could just be because they're flying toward us. These things are definitely armed. Their defenses seem to be armor based but they might not have shields raised."

"Get ours up," Desmond said. "Just in case. Salina, try them as well. Make sure Gil's looking into this. Zach, hold position for now."

Ulian added, "we're putting some distance between us, Captain. In the event that conflict breaks out, we'll give you some room to maneuver. Remaining on tactical net but dropping off this line. Ulian out."

Cassie returned to staring at her screen, observing the silhouettes.

They were sleek, pointed at the front with wide bases for the primary thrusters. Bristled spines stuck out all over the hull, ground down to fine needle points. Internal scans showed room for organic occupants but there were none there.

The computers are likely using up the majority of the power. Cassie measured their energy output and it was five times higher than the Gnosis, their reactors burning hard to produce it. She didn't have a scale to determine whether they were taxing their systems or not. The fact they were moving swiftly made it seem unlikely to be a problem.

Cassie put images of the ships up on the main screen. "Please note the bristles. I believe those are weapons but it's hard to say. They're not currently producing any special energy. These aren't on turrets or mobile platforms, meaning they would have to face us to fire. You can see the energy outputs on the side there."

"And no organic life?" Vincent asked.

"Room for it, but not present." Cassie shrugged. "These are like those ships we encountered where … where Sergeant Gorman died." She cleared her throat after announcing that. "The energy output *could* be a result of some sort of consciousness controlling them but I'm not convinced."

"Why?" Desmond asked.

"Because I feel like they would've communicated with us." Cassie fell silent for a moment. The next part of her report felt particularly profound, although somewhat speculative. "Our two vessels may be the first of our type of propulsion to arrive in this star system for a very long time. This party approaching may be curious."

"Why send so many?" Vincent asked. "My thought is that they're being aggressive. We should get our fighters out there and prepare for combat."

"Not quite yet," Desmond said. "If we escalate because we're twitchy, we'll have no chance to settle this with a conversation." He turned to Salina. "Ensure we're running all our scans and attempts through the Stalwart. Let's stay in this together."

"They've dropped their communications probe," Cassie said. "It's ready to relay a message to the fleet."

“Let’s hope they’re in place,” Vincent muttered. “Still nothing on hail?”
Salina shook her head. “Afraid not.”
“ETA for these ships?” Desmond asked.
“Eight minutes,” Cassie said. “I’d anticipate they’re running at full speed but even so, that’s *really* fast. It would take us twice as long to get to their orbit.”
Zach started tapping his foot. “I’m not sure about this, sir. I don’t like it. Automated stuff tends to have a specific mission and if they’re charging out here without talking, this seems hostile.”
“I agree,” Salina added. “If they have the ability to get here in rapid order, they could talk to us. That’s a guarantee.”
Cassie turned to Desmond to get his response. He sat there, contemplating the situation for a long moment. “I’m with you both,” he finally said. “Get Ulian back on the line.” The Pahxin commander’s face appeared on screen. “We’re thinking these guys don’t want to have a quiet talk. What’s your opinion?”
“They have yet to answer hails,” Ulian replied. “We’ve just punched through the interference for a good planetary scan. There are sentient lifeforms there but I’m beginning to suspect they aren’t necessarily in charge.”
Desmond rubbed his chin, glancing back at Cassie. “Is that your assessment?”
“It could be where the people disappeared to.” Cassie shrugged. “My scans show highly advanced tech on the planet but … we might want to make contact quickly.”
“As in sending people,” Vincent concluded. “That’s what you propose?”
“If they’re ignoring our hails, we could get someone down there.”
“Ulian,” Desmond asked. “Did you pick up any orbital defenses?”
“There are satellites,” Ulian said. “Our pilots can make short work of them. My recommendation is that we deploy our fighters, take care of these five, and make a landing on the planet.”
Desmond leaned back in his chair, letting out a deep breath. “This seems like the opposite of why we came here. But …” He finally

nodded. “Alright, Vincent, give the order. All ships to launch. Get line up some escort duty for our shuttles. Ulian, can you commit troops to the landing?”
“Affirmative,” Ulian said. “I’ll have my people coordinate with your pilots to make this run. We’ll talk soon.”
Cassie turned to her scanner, staring at the screen in thought. *A computer is calling the shots here. This has no sentient involvement. This attack may not be perceived negatively once it begins.* She jotted down her notes for her log entry but kept it to herself for the moment. The fight was about to start regardless. Her observations would be useful afterward.
“Should we call in the reinforcements?” Vincent asked. “They could come in handy if these guys have more people to throw at us.”
Desmond shook his head. “No, they’re our trump card. We need to wait to know they’ll be necessary. That element of surprise is going to be of value I think.”
If they aren’t just computers, Cassie thought. *But they are so overwhelming numbers won’t necessarily help. In fact, more ships might warrant a larger response.* “We want to keep our attack force limited as we can. In case the odds add up to more enemy vessels being sent in our direction before we can stop the fight.”
“What do you mean?” Salina asked. “Wait. You think … yes, I see. The mentality is that we’re being addressed by an AI which will attribute strict numbers to our situation.”
“Exactly.”
“Ships are launching,” Vincent said. “We’ll be engaged in less than four minutes with the larger vessels.”
“Zach,” Desmond turned to the pilot, “power up the weapons and prepare to fire. First strike might be our best chance here.”
Cassie focused on the planet’s surface, looking for any information she could provide to the marines. They would need a landing zone, somewhere solid to begin their own attack. She hoped to put them near the population of sentient life, it all seemed to be congregated around a single point.
That’s where I’ll put my attention. Okay, guys. I’ll make this as safe as

possible.

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Chapter 6

Heat allowed the others to board the shuttle before taking up the final position in the back. He sat down as the ramp came up, strapping himself in. The power armor felt familiar, comforting in a way. Even as he considered never donning it again back on Earth, he found himself looking forward to getting back into action.

Fielding sat across from him, speaking through the com. “Mission is simple. Make contact with the sentient life on the planet but we’ve got to be prepared for a fight. We also might be saving people so we are looking at possible rescue op. Do you have any questions as we head out?”

Corporal Vine asked, “do we have any special rules of engagement?”

“Unfortunately,” Fielding replied, “we’ll have to keep them fluid. I’ll be there with you and let you know as we get into it.” The ship rattled as it launched. “We’ll have an escort but this is a good twenty-minute flight from the Gnosis. We’ll be supported by the Pahxin. Keep close, remember your training, and we’ll be home before you know it.”

Heat wasn’t so sure about that last part. It sounded wishful. Of course, a little optimism might go a long way. *One more fight with some unknown enemy*, he thought. *One more trip to a planet no one’s heard of or been on since the beginning of time.* He smiled. *Gorman would’ve loved this shit. Hope you’re watching, man. It could be wild*.

***

Rythi woke when someone shook him several times. His eyes peeled back, feeling as though they’d been coated in sand. Asti looked down on him, a nasty bruise decorating the left side of her face. He sat up, groaning as his head swam. When the blood started flowing, his heart rate increased, making him feel sick.

“Where are we?” Rythi didn’t dare open his eyes again until his head stopped spinning. “What happened?”

“We’ve been moved to some kind of holding area,” Asti replied.

“There are other people here. They let me sleep for a couple hours but now, something’s going on.”
“What?” Rythi blinked several times. They were in a room with windows this time, an obvious door to his right. Beds lined the area, bunks set up for dozens of people. They were all gathered around the glass, peering outside. “What’re they all doing?’
“Apparently, the surface of the planet is usually placid,” Asti explained. “Very little goes on out there. Now, there are things running around … like those armored things that captured us? They seem to be deploying … like a military unit of some kind.”
“That doesn’t sound good.” Rythi slid off the bed and had to accept her assistance to remain standing. Once he found his footing, he nodded his thanks to her and stumbled toward the window. He counted more than twenty other Pahxin gathered there, each of them in various styles of dress … including a Tol’An uniform. That made him frown. “Pardon me.”
They parted for him, allowing him to approach the window. He leaned against the frame, peering out on an alien landscape of impossible structures and technology. They were tall, rising up to the heavens, black metal and grooved. He gasped at the visual, the strange orange-red hue cast from the sky.
As Asti described, dozens of the armored aliens rushed about, moving into position near what appeared to be a landing port. Ships rose from domes here and there, rocketing upward to depart the atmosphere. He watched their heat signatures depart, noting they were a mix of small and medium vessels.
“Fighters and something else,” Rythi said. “They must be going to meet an enemy of some kind.”
“But what?” One of the other Pahxin asked. “Their own enemies? Our people?”
“I’m sure,” the Tol’An agent spoke up, “they are about to be crushed by the might of my organization. You will all be saved soon but prepare yourselves. It will be expected of you to join the cause. To bow to our rule.”
Rythi felt tempted to let him know his people were no more. A more

pressing point was the fact this man must've been present here for some time. How long had he been stuck there, thinking his terrorist allies would save him? An interesting question but ultimately, the answer didn't matter.

They were all stuck there but this might've been their chance to get free.

"We need to understand what's going on here," Rythi said. "Has anyone seen the door open before?"

Asti answered, "they put food in here so we've seen it."

Rythi nodded. "Okay. What did they look like? Were they wearing armor?"

"The one who fed us last time was." The Tol'An said. "What do you care?"

"I'd like to get out of here," Rythi replied. "Anyone who's interested in the same thing should probably help me. What do we have? Anything at all?"

"They took all my gear!" A man's voice rang out from the crowd.

"Mine too!" They all started shouting at the same time. Rythi walked over to the door with Asti and the Tol'An close behind him. He examined the door for several moments before a sonic boom rumbled the whole building. Turning toward the window, he saw several more ships launching toward the sky just as others entered the atmosphere.

"Who're they?" Asti asked. "I wish I had my scanner!"

The Tol'An scoffed. "Undoubtedly, they're my people."

"Uh huh." Rythi rolled his eyes. "You think you're so important they'd send someone specifically to save you, huh?"

"We look after our own, fool." The Tol'An glared at him. "What's your name?"

"Rythi. You?"

"Cahl."

"Okay, so listen. We can't sit around here waiting for your pals. I want to do whatever it takes to escape." Rythi gestured at the door. "You guys ever challenge these things? Ever push back?"

Cahl nodded. "Once. We lost two people in the process."

"They killed them?" Asti asked.

“They took them away.” Cahl shrugged. “I don’t know if they were killed. Likely. Though to be honest, they may have huge groups of people all over the base. I’ve only been in this one.” He turned. “Have any of you been in another cell?”

The people started shouting again. Rythi clenched his fists and pounded on the door, adding his voice to the shouts. “Help!” He shouted. “Let us out! Help us! Please, we need assistance! You can’t leave us in here like animals during an attack! Come on! This is insanity! Let us out!”

Asti stared at him like he’d lost his mind but he didn’t stop, not until he heard footsteps approaching. He turned to her. “Help me! Hit the walls. All of you! Start shouting for help!”

They complied, though a few with less zeal than others. Perhaps they were the ones who witnessed people getting dragged off. Rythi felt like it would be better to be in motion, to be out of the cage seeing the rest of the facility than waiting around to die in any number of horrible ways.

They have the weapons to kill us but haven’t, Rythi thought. *That must mean we have some kind of value to them, some type of purpose that they’re going to take advantage of. I want to exploit that. Get ourselves mobile. Maybe find a* functional *ship. Something we can pilot out of here while this battle transpires*.

“Stand back!” A voice cried out through a speaker. A translation. Rythi motioned for the others to move away but he was poised to attack. The door opened and two of the armored guards held their weapons on them. “What is the meaning of this noise? What are you doing? Do you not understand your place here?”

“No!” Cahl shouted at them. “Why don’t you tell us, scum? Before your miserable lives are ended!”

“You are to be tested for divinity. Brought before the foundation to determine your viability. We have waited generations. You must understand it will take time. You will be safe. If you are patient.”

“We aren’t patient!” Rythi stepped forward. “We have been kidnapped, stolen off our ships and homes. You cannot believe we are simply going to sit here! You must let us go! Now! You don’t have a

choice!”
As if he shouted a rallying cry, the other prisoners chose that moment to charge their captors, rushing toward with screams of desperate rage. Rythi hadn’t expected the surge of movement. He was knocked into from behind and stumbled, nearly dropping to the ground. If he lost his balance, he’d undoubtedly be trampled by at least two or three people.
A strong hand grabbed his arm, steadying him. Rythi looked up at Cahl, who glared down at him. “Stay on your feet, rabble-rouser.”
Weapons hummed, firearms blasting into the crowd. Three people went down but not before the others swarmed the enemy, ripping their weapons free and bringing them to the floor. The unarmored man shouted, his translator not operating quickly enough to reveal what he was saying.
“Wait!” Rythi shouted but it was too late. They’d already killed the man and were working on ripping the armor off the others. Stretching them out, they pulled at the parts. It seemed the protective shells were sealed somehow, likely against the environment but it certainly ensured they couldn’t be stripped.
“That was horrible …” Asti muttered. “But at least we’re out of the cell.”
Rythi peered at the two men who grabbed the weapons, holding them over their heads. “I’d rather we have those than them,” he whispered back, “but yes, we should be able to get out of here now.” Another rumble sounded as more ships departed. “Looks like they’re emptying the base, too. Maybe that’ll work to our benefit.”

***

Squadron Leader Dennis Arden led Mustang Squadron, set to escort the Gnosis troop shuttles to the planet. They plotted a course to give a wide berth to the incoming larger vessels, those that might have automated turrets to harass them. Ships from the Stalwart joined them, fighters and shuttles alike.
A private com request pinged his system. He established the link.

“This is Arden.”
“Greetings,” Dala Ahnshyr said. They’d established something of a relationship, spending time together when possible. He hadn’t been able to see her back on Earth this last time even though they tried. “I see that the only way to make time for us is to engage in combat on the edge of space.”
“I hope that’s not true.” Dennis was about to say something else when a proximity alert went off, buzzing through the ship. His scanner showed a projectile on rapid approach. He veered hard away, to the left, narrowly evading the attack. “Where the hell did that even come from?” He switched back to the regular com. “Anyone see what launched that?”
“It came from the larger ships,” Flight Lieutenant Shane Goring replied. “More incoming!”
“Evasive maneuvers!” Dennis shouted. “Shuttles, fall out and put as much distance as you can from those things. Get on your turrets if you have to.” He jammed his afterburners to full, taking himself further away from his attackers. The projectiles proved to be faster than they were, closing rapidly.
The attack would hit in less than ten seconds. Dennis counted two and dove, not giving the thing a chance to follow. It passed by, close enough to make out the details on the bottom of the ordnance.
“It’s on me,” Lieutenant Hal Brown called. “Damn, it’s fast!” Dennis pulled up, closing in to help.
“Bank left,” Dennis said. “I’m trying to get a firing solution.” His computer started beeping while trying to acquire the target but it wouldn’t get tone in time. He pulled the trigger, adjusting his course to lead the projectile. Hal banked hard to the left.
The projectile attempted to follow, moving right into Dennis’s field of fire. Several beams slapped the side, slagging the metal and making it spin. The warhead went up a moment later, erupting into a white globe that went dark half a moment later.
Dennis blinked away a halo that hampered his vision. Even through the darkened canopy and his visor, the light still managed to nearly blind him. *Those things must pack a real punch.*

As if answering his thought, Dala's voice came over the com. "Scans indicate that one of those could breach our shields and likely destroy a fighter in a single hit. If collision is a foregone conclusion, eject before it happens. It may be your only chance to survive."
"Great." Dennis muttered. They were pulling away from the larger vessels and no more of the missiles came their way. He didn't understand why not. If they were fully automated ships, they should simply keep hammering away until they took someone out. That's when his scans picked up more incoming ships from the planet. "You guys see those?"
"Yeah," Shane said, "ten enemy ships on their way."
Dennis checked their numbers. Six in his Mustang squadron and ten of Dala's people. Couple that with four total shuttles and they had quite the force. They were all heavily armed so they stood a good chance of giving the enemy hell. But if there were more of those projectiles, the fight might turn rough.
"Prepare to engage," Dennis announced. "I'll call in for backup. Shuttles, be ready. We're going to need you shooting too."

***

Heat received the message about the projectiles. He turned to Fielding. "I'm getting on the turret. The automation tends to work better against human pilots than AI. At least that's what I found the last time we fought drones."
"Go for it." Fielding nodded. "I'll have people jump in the guns on the other shuttles."
Heat moved down the line and disengaged his power armor, stepping out so he could crawl into the turret compartment. He sat in the chair, strapped in, then engaged the manual control. A screen flickered on, giving him a high-resolution view of the space outside. Several ships hurried toward them, their heat coronas casting purple light behind them.
Scans showed they were a pretty serious distance away but they were closing fast. Before Heat could even settle into his seat, they were

within firing range. Their silhouettes were pointy, like triangles with engines and weapons. They rushed forward, coming straight at them in their assault.

Heat started blasting away, laying down a heavy field of fire they'd have to work through. His fellow shuttle marines did the same. The enemy ships flew forward without concern about the attacks, weathering the assault as shields flared and they pushed on, like ships in a violent sea bursting through dangerous waves.

Heat got a good bead on one, pulling the trigger. He annihilated his target, cutting through the defenses and turning it to a bright flash. His camera dampened the flash, saving his vision. Had it not, he was certain it would've dazzled him, if not caused temporary blindness.

We'll have to be leery about that shit when we get to the planet, Heat thought. *If their power sources go up like that, God knows what we might end up dealing with when they get taken out*.

Pahxin fighters engaged, conjuring up total chaos. They twisted and banked, performing wild barrel rolls while laying into the enemy with every opportunity presented. Explosions erupted around the shuttle, each vying for Heat's attention as he tried to focus on the enemy but firing seemed dangerous in light of the way their allies flew.

Jesus, guys! You're out of control!

Heat eased off on the trigger, waiting for an opportunity, spinning the turret around to find another shot, keeping an eye on their rear. So far they were okay and they'd arrive at the planet soon. Once they started their run, he anticipated an early bailout. *I'll have to get in my armor before we break atmosphere.*

The ship rattled from an attack, a heavy blast that caught them in the rear. It seemed to come from a beam weapon, not enough to take them out. *Thank God it wasn't one of those projectile missile things*. Heat spun the turret around and took some random shots but he had to stop again when more friendlies flooded his line of fire.

Alright, be patient. We've got this. Just let them do their thing. They're the escorts. Heat drew a deep breath and let it out, watching the scanner for his next chance to shoot.

***

Squadron Leader Anna Jager ran the Charger group. They rushed into action, hurrying toward Mustang's location to provide backup. Enemy capital ships were just about in range to engage the Stalwart and the Gnosis. The pointy hulls made them look intimidating but how practical they were remained to be seen.

Silhouettes of the smaller fighters looked similar. Larger vessels were incoming, which made Anna wonder if they should be flattered that the enemy sent such numbers against them. *I wonder when the Pahxin will summon their fleet to help out*. Leadership held out for a diplomatic solution but in a few minutes, that would be highly unlikely.

They're not going to take kindly to us taking these ships out, Anna thought. *But if they're all automated, maybe they won't care.*

The rest of her team broke up into a vanguard formation with her in the lead. They went in weapons hot, closing in on a brutal dogfight where enemy ships danced with allied forces, moving within a cloud of beam weapons and debris. The shuttles lumbered on, continuing their voyage toward the planet.

Somehow, they evaded the worst of the fighting. Their turrets fired occasionally but Anna could see their problem. Friendlies intermingled so tightly with the enemy, it would be nearly impossible to differentiate. *They must be stressed as hell in there*. Anna marked several targets for her people, enemy fighters that didn't have as much heat all over them.

"Break formation," Anna said, "stick to your wing and take out the targets I've painted. We need to mop this mess up fast. Break." She dove just as she finished the comment, planning to come in beneath the first of their targets. Pushing the ship to top speed, g force shoved her back into her seat, the pressure making it hard to breathe.

And we were about to be done with this, Anna thought. *The final fight against the Tol'An was supposed to end days like this for a while. I guess we counted our victory a little too soon*.

Pulling up, Anna grunted from the sudden change of motion. She depressed the trigger, sending a volley of mass drivers at her target.

They missed but the attack caused the fighter to jerk away from the shots. *So they have* some *sense of danger*. The first contact indicated otherwise, especially when the shuttles opened up on them.

The drones veered away, avoiding the attacks. Their proximity detection must've been incredible, not to mention the programming required to provide the vessels with self-preservation. *Machines that care about themselves. That's an incredible feat. Unless of course we find out they're being controlled on the planet*.

They'd encountered such a thing before after all.

Anna narrowed her eyes as she zeroed in on her target again, this time using her beam cannons. One shot winged her target, causing an oval barrier to appear around it, the shields reacting to the attack. She passed by at full speed, pulling up sharply in an effort to find another firing solution.

The drone spun on a dime, coming around on her tail. It opened fire, rapid blue shots erupting from the strange thorns attached to their larger aft sections. The first couple made contact before Anna could react, veering to the right while diving at the same time. It bought her only a few seconds.

Her attacker remained on her, adjusting accordingly to continue the assault. "I'm in some trouble here," she called over the com. "These things become attached." The next series of blasts riddled her shields, dropping them by twenty percent. *At least they're not giants*. She made another course correction, this time entering a barrel roll and climbing.

Erratic flying helped. Though the drones certainly boasted sophisticated programming, they weren't perfect. When she jiggled the flight stick, taking herself in different directions, the enemy lost her as a target and pulled away, looking for other prey. Unfortunately, Anna felt sick from the maneuvers.

"It must've thought I was done," Anna said. She leveled out and turned, getting back into the action. "Where the heck are you, Preston?" Her wingman, Flight Lieutenant Preston Everest, wasn't around. "Are you still out there?"

"Had some of my own problems," Preston replied. "I'm on my way to

you now."
"Tighten up your wing formation, folks. These drones—" Several shots struck her on the side, interrupting the comment. An alarm went off, indicating her shields were down to forty percent. She dove, noticing Preston out of the corner of her eye.
He began to fire, taking down the drone that attacked her with a series of energy blasts mixed with mass driver shots. The drone spun in place and exploded, a bright white that faded quickly but dazzled her even from behind.
"Are you okay, Preston?"
"Yeah, I knew to close my eyes for a second," Preston replied. "Of course that might not be the best course of action while flying out here. The scans indicate that would temporarily blind us even through our visors, the tinted cockpit … the works. What a parting shot, huh?"
"No doubt." Another two drones moved into her path, coming straight for her. She fired but decided not to play chicken with them, diving instead and hitting her afterburners. Two ships from Mustang passed her by, their weapons already firing before they even passed by.
More energy weapons discharged around her. She'd entered the real chaos of the dogfight and it took everything she had to not collide with another ship. *I have to pull out of this*. Veering around debris and enemies, friends and allies alike, she headed for what she hoped was the edge of the action.
Something struck her on the bottom, hard enough to nudge her a good five feet. It was enough of a course correction that she almost lost control. Finesse wasn't exactly an option. She ended up jamming the throttle forward, letting instinct take over. Her stomach flipped as fear gripped her heart.
Different ships flew in front of her, crossing her path at blurring speeds. She couldn't even tell who they were, friend or foe. The only thing she could do was make course corrections in an effort to avoid them. Random shots caught her here and there, but suddenly she burst into open space.
I made it. The scanner showed her shields recharged up to fifty percent, even after taking a few casual shots. "Preston, where are

you?"
"I'm nearly to you. This is nuts!"
"You're telling me." Anna checked the scanner. The shuttles were just on the verge of reaching the atmosphere. "Raptor, do you guys have the orbital defenses? We can't get there in time."

***

"Roger that," Squadron Leader Dimitri Gerrit responded. "We're on an attack run right now. Stay back there and deal with those drones as long as you can. We don't need them on our tails while we take these guys."
The planet was surrounded by small orbital lasers which may have acted as an early warning system as well. Scans indicated their ranges were carefully plotted to provide overarching fire, supporting one another in quads. Raptor planned to take out at least sixteen of them in order to create a window for the shuttles.
Gnosis fighters should've had range on the satellites, especially if they went straight at them. Dimitri directed his squadron to position themselves directly in front of their targets and charge in with the intention of flipping around and getting out as quickly as possible. Targeting computers showed the devices couldn't take much damage before becoming disabled.
Time to put that to the test. The targets were half the size of the fighters. They had maneuvering thrusters to allow them to move about like turrets, granting them the ability to take shots at whatever angle was necessary. An energy reading indicated they might've been linked up with their counterparts, essentially tethered like a great net.
Scans showed a five percent probability that destroying multiple satellites at the same time would disrupt the entire network of them. Dimitri didn't buy it, not when one considered the technological advancements that allowed things like the drones not to mention the fact the planet remained a relative secret for so long.
No, they have a contingency plan to avoid losing their entire defensive blanket. As the planet rotated on its axis, the satellites remained in

place. That meant the window they created to get to their destination would not be directly above them when the shuttles wanted to leave. *We get to do this a second time from the other side probably*.

Flight Lieutenant Dylan Ball operated as his second. He sent the ping to indicate he was ready to charge. The others sounded off as well. Dimitri gave the word and they initiated their engines, charging the defensive net.

The hot second Dimitri's computer showed he was within range, he pulled the trigger, lighting up his turret with beam fire. The thing didn't seem to have shields but it withstood the first five direct hits. A piece flew off on the sixth. It managed a quick shot, a single red beam that lanced out from the barrel at the center before the whole structure exploded into pieces.

Attacks from the surrounding turrets riddled his forward shields, energy beams whittling them down to seventy percent in short order. He spun around and hit his afterburners, fleeing the attack as he did. More of the turrets went down around him, their explosions leaving behind a white dot where they'd been moments before.

Rear shields took a brief beating but Dimitri fell out of their range, drawing a deep breath. *I wish that was the end of it*. He checked the scans. Only one of their proposed targets survived the initial charge, the one that his newest pilot had been assigned, Flying Officer Norbit Dense.

"What happened, Norbit?" Dimitri asked. "Are you okay?"

"Took a serious beating from the surrounding turrets, sir. Dropped my shields down to twenty percent."

"Okay, stay back while we clear more of them. Don't enter the fray again until you're at fifty percent or more." Dimitri paused. His scans indicated incoming ships from the surface. "Looks like we're about to have company." Silhouettes showed larger than the fighters. "They're big. Confirm me, Dylan."

"Confirmed," Dylan said. "Looks like three gunboat sized ships."

Dimitri informed the shuttles. They had their turrets manned and were ready for them. "Chances are good they're going to break orbit about the same time as these ships arrive to mess with us. Get in there, take

out your turret and fly straight for the new targets. Go for your attack run now. Norbit, follow us when we clear the way."

Dimitri lined up with his next turret, hitting the afterburner. They didn't have time to mess around, no margin to be precise. He flew at the target from a slight angle, pulling the trigger just before he was within solid range.

The first few attacks missed but the next three were direct hits. At that same moment, other turrets locked on, tearing at his shields, chewing on him as he continued to focus on his target. Instinct screamed for him to veer off, to break the attack but he had to take down his part of the net before the shuttles got any closer.

The satellite finally popped, exploding into thousands of pieces. Dimitri corrected his course and charged the enemy ships, noting that his shields were down to the forty-five percent level. The net appeared to be open enough for their charges providing they kept their formation tight and flew through the middle.

They'll figure it out, Dimitri thought. *We're going to be a little too busy to clear out any more of those things, especially if these bigger ships prove to be hard to bring down*.

***

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Chapter 7

Desmond held tight to his seat as the Gnosis shook, taking a direct hit from the larger of the vessels. The enemy forces broke up with three going after the Stalwart. The spread seemed reasonable but that hit felt pretty fierce. It wasn't just a gentle nudge. That attack went straight to the bone, or at least … it felt like it.

"Damage report," Desmond called out. "Let's get some movement going, Zach."

"Shields held at eighty percent," Salina said. "There was some kind of kinetic side effect to the attack. It's like a reverse tractor beam almost … like they used an energized battering ram."

"What's the potential there?" Vincent asked.

"If we didn't have shields," Salina replied, "they'd be able to punch a hole right through the hull. Think of it as crushing a tin can … only it would take more than a couple stomps to put us down in that analogy."

The ship moved suddenly, thrusters engaged to carry them away from another attack. Their opponents were attempting to get on either side of them, looking for flanking maneuvers. "Pull us back," Desmond ordered, "keep those two ships in front of us. In fact, pull us back starboard, full speed. Put one of them between the three of us."

As Zach performed his task, Desmond turned his attention to his terminal, noting that the Stalwart had engaged with guns blazing. Their weapons tore through the smaller of the ships, annihilating the shields and puncturing the hull. On a normal vessel, such catastrophic damage would've ended the fight.

The unmanned ship didn't care about compression, didn't need oxygen for the inhabitants. It would continue to fight until the power went out or it was destroyed utterly. Desmond thought of that just before they started the engagement. He had Cassie start searching for key locations to target, the best points to shoot when they opened up.

Their first volley tested the waters. Zach slammed the larger of the enemy ships with everything they had. At first, it seemed as though

they relied solely on armor as their means of defense but when their blasts hit, a blue oval surrounded the vessel, proving they had energy barriers after all.

"I've figured it out," Cassie called out just as the Gnosis moved into position to keep the enemy on top of one another. "It's reactive. They have sensors that crank on those shields only when necessary. It allows them to regulate power more efficiently but … it seems like that would be something we could exploit."

"The question is whether or not they scan prior to the attack," Salina continued. "Do you think they're checking our energy build up or do their sensors pick up the energy reading just before it makes contact?"

"I don't know," Cassie replied, "but I'd say we can—"

"Incoming!" Zach interrupted, slapping his console. It made the ship lurch upward.

That'll cause some troubles, Desmond thought. Much of the crew couldn't wear safety belts. They had to move about their department to fulfill their tasks. When the ship moved abruptly, they'd get tossed around. The veterans were used to it, knew how to keep their sea legs under them.

"Send casualty reports to my terminal," Desmond said. He watched the screen as Zach maneuvered them to put the smaller ship between them and the larger enemy. "Now that we're in position, put some hurt on the nearest target. I want to see what those shields can take and how long they'll last."

Zach let fly with another volley, timing it out to hit them with a sustained level of fire over the course of thirty seconds. The barrage of beams, missiles and mass driven chunks hammered the enemy's shields, causing them to remain bright around the vessel for several moments after the attack ended.

"How'd they fare?" Desmond asked. "What's the status? Zach, fire again as soon as you can. Keep us moving. That other ship can't shoot at us right now without going through their friend."

"They took a pounding," Salina said. "But those shields … it's hard to tell what I'm seeing from them. Cassie?"

"Same," Cassie replied. "They have a secondary power source that

continually sends energy to their shields. It's pulsing, escalating to meet the amount of punishment we dish out." She hummed. "I'm going to reach out to the Stalwart. They've caused damage to theirs. We need to understand how."

The ship shook as Zach made another rapid maneuver, this one felt like they went down. They still took a nudge, though it wasn't nearly as bad as the first. "Hurry," Desmond said. "We're rapidly approaching a stalemate here. Get me a path forward. If more of these bastards come, we have to know what we're doing."

***

Rythi and his band of escapees rushed down a long hallway. Asti, he and Cahl led the way but none of them knew where they were going. They couldn't get the armor off the captured aliens so the men with guns shot them repeatedly in the head until their cries went silent and they stopped moving.

Even so, it must've been the kinetic force that killed them. The armor remained intact throughout the assault, meaning the defensive capabilities were incredible. Rythi shuddered to think what their ships were like and how difficult it would be to be at war with them. He didn't know how the Pahxin military upgraded, but he hoped they were ready for this enemy.

After all, why have all this technology if they didn't intend to invade something? They must've been building up. But the words of their captor rang in Rythi's head. *Brought before the foundation to be tested for divinity*. He didn't know what any of that meant but if these things were religious psychopaths …

Cahl should've gotten on with them well, Rythi thought. *Perhaps he was threatened by some of his own. Men that were pretty much on the same wavelength*. He shuddered at the thought. These aliens, which admittedly looked a great deal like a Pahxin, seemed to believe their prisoners should've understood their intentions.

Stuck amongst so much technology, they may have lost their minds. Do they worship these machines? What is the foundation? Rythi turned to

Asti. “We should stop running a moment.” He was starting to get winded anyway. “Cahl, we need to talk a moment.”
“Why?” Cahl asked. “We’re trying to leave this place. I thought that was your whole point of causing trouble in the first place.”
“Yes, but think about it for a moment. The technology here, what that man said.” Rythi stopped and stepped aside. The other prisoners slowed to a halt, turning toward him. “I’m concerned that we won’t be able to control their ships. Not without understanding more. For example, I want to know what this *foundation* is.”
“Their seat of government,” Cahl said, waving his hand dismissively. “Naturally, they were going to bring us before some form of council to determine whether or not we should be sacrificed to their heathen deities. I don’t see why you care about this. It isn’t going to help us escape this place.”
“It might,” Rythi replied. “We don’t know how to use their equipment. The armor on those things you people killed was not impacted by shooting their own weapons into it. Doesn’t that mean something to you? This is highly advanced technology. This foundation might be the only way we understand what’s happening.”
“You don’t even know where to go,” Cahl scoffed. “You’re wasting your time!”
“Then go on without me,” Rythi said, turning to Asti. “What do you say?”
“I’m with you.” Asti stepped beside him. “Good luck, Cahl.”
“You’re both fools.” Cahl glared. “Give them one of the weapons.”
“We need them!” One of the armed Pahxin complained. “We can’t give away our advantages!”
“Without this man we wouldn’t be free. Idiot or not, he deserves a chance.” Cahl grabbed the gun, yanking it from the man’s hands. He thrust it at Rythi. “Take it before I change my mind.”
Rythi couldn’t believe his eyes. He took the weapon and backed away. The fact the Tol’An showed some compassion, some honor, confused him. He felt compelled to tell the man what happened to his people but it was neither the time nor the place. Instead, he nodded his head in thanks. “Good luck, Cahl.”

“Farewell, fool.” Cahl shook his head. “The rest of you, follow me.”
The others left, grumbling about leaving behind a weapon still. Rythi didn’t care. He doubted he’d ever see them again. Whether one group or the other died, or even escaped, they would not encounter each other in the vast universe. He looked at Asti. “So we should go back to the cell.”
“Back?” Asti’s eyes went wide. “What for?”
“We didn’t bother to look around there. I suspect we’ll find something. Perhaps other prisoners, a data terminal, anything that will allow us to understand this foundation better.”
“You know, I was going to side with you regardless,” Asti said, “but I have to admit, I’m not entirely sure what you’re hoping to accomplish. This isn’t a scientific expedition. We’re attempting to escape a prison.”
“Yes, but think about it. Every other prison you or I have ever heard of is one that we understand the rules. We know why someone would send us there. We’re on an alien world with advanced technology we barely understand. Our companions who just left are going to find themselves in a hangar with vessels they can’t control or even start up.”
“If there are any left.” Asti nodded. “So are you thinking we can talk to these people maybe?”
A loud noise began to blare overhead. Lights flashed red. “I don’t know.” Rythi looked up. “But I can tell you this, they likely know we’re running around … or that’s something else.” He started back toward the prison, picking up the pace until he was jogging. “This planet may be under siege too but we can’t assume they are a known quantity.”
“You mean it could be another alien race coming down here.”
“Yes. It doesn’t have to be Tol’An or Pahxin …” Rythi squinted up ahead at the corridor they’d left. He saw movement. “Do you see that?”
“Aim the weapon!” Asti looked around, frantic. “We have no cover in this hallway!”
“That might be the wrong decision,” Rythi said. “What if they shoot back? We know their armor can withstand their weapons!”

A beam shot past his head. Rythi threw himself forward, going prone. He returned fire, shooting as fast as he could in rapid succession. Panic overwhelmed him but he knew it would serve him well considering how much the alien's armor could take. He couldn't quite bring himself to consider them enemies, even when they took a shot at him.

Another beam hit the ground near him and he winced. Asti cried out, joining him on the floor. "Shoot them! Shoot them faster!"

Rythi pulled the trigger over and over until his finger ached. He felt something hot graze his leg. Asti put her hand on his back. "I think you got him …" The weapon was hot in his hands and he finally slowed down, rising to a crouch while aiming down the site.

Moving cautiously forward, he saw a body lying on its back. "Grab its weapon," Rythi muttered, peering around the area as if another alien might jump out at any moment. "Get it quickly. I can't say there aren't more of them around here."

Asti complied. This brought them into the corridor they'd come from where their cell had been located. The body of their attacker was sprawled out in a contorted manner, his neck bending to the left. It made Rythi swallow hard. He hadn't killed anyone since the war. Injured, yes but not something final.

"Hey!" Asti nudged him hard. "Focus. We can't get caught up in this. We have to move. This is your plan, I don't know what we're doing."

"Finding … something." Rythi shook his head. Something in a window to his right caught his eye, a blur of blue flame. He rushed over and peered out. "That's an incoming ship."

"I can't make out the silhouette," Asti replied. "I guess someone will be here soon then."

Footsteps to the left pulled his attention away from the window. It came from the direction they needed to go but this time, there was a corner they could use as cover. Rythi rushed over and peeked around. A man without armor approached, carrying a smaller weapon that looked like a pistol—much like they'd used on the ship when they tried to escape before.

"One." Rythi muttered. "No armor."

“Maybe we can take him prisoner,” Asti said. She stepped out and aimed. “Drop your weapon! Do it now!”
The alien spun toward her. Rythi pointed his gun at the man. He was bald, his blue eyes large with fear. For a moment, it seemed as if the alien didn’t have a translation device but then the tiny speaker spoke for him. “Why are you fleeing? What have you done?”
“I told you to drop your weapon,” Asti said. “I will not ask again!”
“You’ve killed! Tried to escape … but you are the divinity prospect.”
The alien seemed genuinely confused. “We have been waiting for you for generations. Praying you would come. Searching for you. Bringing back who we thought were the worthy. And now you hurt us. Is this what it means to be divine?”
“We don’t know what you’re talking about!” Rythi shouted. “Whatever strange paradigm you follow is not ours! We’ve never heard anything about it! It’s not our religion.” He sighed. “Put the weapon down or we’ll fire on you. We’ll commit more death, more murder for our freedom.”
The alien dropped his pistol, tilting his head thoughtfully. “What is your goal here?”
“To get out,” Asti said. “Tell us about the foundation.”
“But there are aliens coming here now. Violent beings who have attacked our ships. The foundation is busy defending the planet.”
“How do you know the people who arrived aren’t the divine?” Rythi asked. “What makes you so certain you aren’t attacking your gods?”
“The foundation has told us.” The alien shrugged. “It governs, guides, it shows. We have followed a path that it laid before us. And one day we will meet those like our ancestors. The detached, the displaced. You must understand. We have been directed to do the things we’ve done.”
Rythi turned to Asti. “They pick up those who aren’t aggressive. That’s the criteria for their … choosing.” He hummed. “So what happened over this planet?”
“The aliens who have arrived began a fight. They proved to be aggressive.”
“Probably because they had no idea what you wanted!” Rythi shouted.

“That’s it, take us to this foundation. Now!”
“I cannot take you to the foundation!” The alien shouted. “I cannot!”
Asti advanced on him, grabbing him by the shoulder. “It’s time to determine if we’re divine. Do what you’re told. Now.”
“This is not the time … but I do not wish to die.” The alien sighed. “Fine. I will bring you. Do not expect a positive welcome. You are aggressive as well. We made a grave mistake bringing you here. It is not the way of our culture to contend with such beings. To allow them to see the sacred.”
“Yeah, well,” Rythi said, “we’ll be the judge of whether this is a good idea or not. Just move. It’s time to see what you’re culture is made of.”

***

Heat dismounted from the turret, climbing back into his armor. There were more enemy ships incoming but they would be dropping soon. He wouldn’t have time to get ready if he remained in the gun and he refused to be left behind on the shuttle. Not on what could be his last deployment.
“Turret’s back on automation,” Heat called into the com. “Do we have escort still?”
“Raptor’s with us,” Fielding said. “They’ll take care of the incoming fighters. We’re going to have to hop before landing, I think. Another hot jump.”
“Best kind.” Heat sighed. “With incoming ships … and anti-aircraft shots probably.”
“Just another day in the marines,” Fielding said. “We’re rapidly approaching the target area.”
“What is the target area?” Vine asked. “Exactly, I mean.”
Heat answered, “Cassie labeled where the largest group of lifeforms was located. There’s a power station nearby. If we have to destroy it, we’ll be in a good position to do so.”
“Isn’t that why they’d send us?” Gillet asked. “I mean, seriously, we’re not here as envoys after all that shooting, right?”

“We’ll do what we can,” Fielding replied. “Just … follow my lead. And before anyone asks, the rules of engagement are simple. If you’re shot at, shoot back.”
“Got it,” Vine replied. “Sounds reasonable.”
The back ramp dropped. Fielding stood. “I’ll hop first. Heat’s taking up the rear.” A red light started blinking over the exit. “Now’s the time. Watch your HUDs, I’ve marked where we’re going.” He turned, took two strides down the ramp and jumped, arms stretched to the sides as he departed.
The others fell out behind him, joining the various other soldiers plunging toward their destination. Their Pahxin allies would have to get closer, practically landing before their payloads could deploy. Power armor gave the humans a fairly sizable advantage but also meant they were the tip of the spear.
Like a marine should be, Heat thought as he charged down the line, leaping out into the open air. Above him, the orange-red clouds swirled in a heavy wind. Below, a technological wonderland spread out in all directions, tall buildings and railways stretching off as far as the eye could see.
Raptor squadron sped around them, engaging triangular fighters. One exploded in a spectacular fashion not even two hundred yards away from Heat, debris flying past him. His automated shield deployed, defending him against the impact. Wincing, he drew his rifle, preparing to fire at something if necessary.
One of the marines took the full brunt of an enemy ship flying straight into him, skewering the man straight through the power armor. The body remained stuck to the drone, hanging limply off the pointy nose. A missile caught up to it, plowing into the rear thrusters. The explosion obliterated the dead marine, scattering his remains.
Jesus Christ! Heat turned his attention to his HUD, showing they still had quite a ways to drop. “This is crazy up here, guys! Use maneuvering thrusters to avoid debris if you can!”
Fielding added, “I’ve got fifteen seconds before I make landfall. Looks like our LZ is clear of hostiles … wait. Well, I jinxed that. Ground forces have converged on the platform I was aiming for. I’m changing

direction and updating your waypoint. Looks like a small structure will provide some cover for us to start the operation."

Heat hit his jump jets, throwing himself nearly two hundred yards to the right. An enemy fighter blasted through the area where he'd been a moment before. *It would've killed me, guaranteed.* Another Raptor ship blasted a target but this time, it collided with the friendly. Both ships went down, the pilot didn't eject.

No! He's … he's way gone. Heat checked his descent. He had less than twenty seconds to his own landfall and he needed to get back into position. Firing his thrusters, he brought himself over the target area again, preparing to hit the ground. Muzzle flashes from Fielding's rifle gave Heat a beacon to ensure he was on target.

Other marines descended around him, coming in close as they made for their landing zone. More explosions resounded above them, booms that their helmets had to dampen considerably. Heat hit his retro thrusters, coming in for a landing that dropped him into a low crouch. Beam fire slapped the wall behind him and he dashed for cover, pressing his back against a wall of metal. "What is this stuff?" He asked. "Cargo? A structure? An antenna?"

"Cover," Fielding replied. "Don't know that it needs any other explanation." Other marines landed around them, pressing in to join them.

Heat checked his scanner. They were facing off against fifteen enemies, each of them armored in something his computer couldn't identify. *Well, shit.* Fielding popped a few beams into one. They didn't *appear* to have any immediate impact. That didn't bode well with their weapons.

"Cassie, it's Heat. Can you read me?"

"I read you," Cassie's voice came through distorted, static-filled. "Our connection is terrible. Are you on the surface now?"

"Affirmative." Heat leaned around and took some shots of his own, leaning back in cover to gather some readings. The enemy didn't even take cover when they fired their rifles. They soaked the attack. "We need some help. Scan the enemy contacts we've got. Their armor appears to be particularly nasty. As in our bullets don't seem to be

stopping it."
"I'm on it," Cassie said.
"Better hurry," Fielding added. "When they realize we're shooting little more than light beams, they might charge."
"I'm rocketing these jerks," Vine called out. "Gillet, join me. Let's put some heavy explosives right up their asses."
The two marines let loose, firing multiple missiles toward the enemy position. Heat poked his weapon around the corner, watching with his camera on the HUD. The ordnance flew wildly for a moment, twisting and turning before moving straight for the armored foes. Four in total landed, one a direct hit.
A massive explosion shook the ramp. Heat crouched to absorb the impact. The bodies of the enemies went flying through the air, one of them in three pieces. Those that weren't in the immediate blast withdrew, falling back toward one of the buildings. The ones that didn't get torn apart hit the ground hard, unmoving.
"That worked," Heat said. "Cassie, they're susceptible to our rockets but we don't have enough of those for a prolonged engagement. Still need some analysis."
"The Pahxin are getting close!" Fielding pointed up. "Look!"
Heat turned to see massive explosions overhead, parts of ships came crashing down, making massive fires that plumed high into the sky. One of the drones dropped as well, the pointy nose plowing through a building, bringing the whole structure toppling down. It happened half a mile away but the collapse made the ground shake.
The two Pahxin shuttles were on final approach, closing in on the target area. They spun in place, hovering as the back doors opened and deployed their troops, a dozen from each vessel. They were armed with similar weapons so they likely wouldn't have any better luck when it came to damaging their opponents.
Not until Cassie comes up with something. Heat turned to Fielding. "We should get moving. Apply a little pressure to the enemy. They know we can hurt 'em now."
"And we've got numbers." Fielding nodded. "Alright everyone, follow me! We're making a push!" Fielding left cover, Heat followed right

behind. They made a dash straight for the opening. Explosions rumbled around them as the battle continued to rage overhead. Movement ahead indicated another fight for the marines as well. Whatever hope they had for diplomacy, whatever desire to communicate with these aliens they had was at least on hold if not destroyed completely. This conflict was as bad as any Heat had seen yet and might turn far more deadly. Especially since the population of that world appeared to be so low.

AI fought their battles for the most part. That meant taking out the power station, knocking out grids … nullifying the enemy's ability to fight. But first, they needed a beachhead and a solid understanding of how to hurt their foes. The fight was far from over. Even as they achieved their first minor push against their opponents, it looked like they'd be in for a haul.

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Chapter 8

Rythi and Asti followed their hostage, struggling to remain standing as the building shook from random explosions bursting outside. When they passed by a window, the three of them stopped to peer out, watching as a massive dogfight took place over the city. Explosions brightened the skyline, fires burned wild, and smoke poured into the air.

This is insanity!

"The invaders have brought destruction!" The alien pressed his hands against the glass. "They ruin our home."

"What do you call yourself?" Rythi asked. "Do you have a name?"

"Kie," he replied. "They call me Kie."

"I'm Rythi and this is Asti." He tapped the man on the shoulder. "We need to keep moving. How much farther to get to the foundation?"

"Not very. We keep you all nearby so that the divinity test can be performed." Kie shoved away from the wall, bowing his head as he walked. "This is a terrible time for our people, for our entire race. What you have witnessed is shameful. To attack the holy planet with such fervor."

"I have a feeling you don't really know what's going on," Asti said. "This might not be what you think it is. After all, have you received a single report? One word from anyone explaining what's happening? No. You're going on some kind of assumption and what's that based on?"

"The holy word states that fire will come and it will not be friendly." Kie looked at Asti. "Does this not look like fire to you?"

"It looks like a misunderstanding," Rythi answered. "It looks like something that could stop if you all had a conversation."

Kie scowled. "The holy word has predicted much."

"Has any of it come true?" Rythi asked. "Have you learned anything from this?"

A fighter went down less than a hundred yards from the window, slamming the ground so hard they nearly dropped to the ground due

to the impact. Asti steadied Rythi but Kie fell to the ground, crawling quickly to his feet. He moved to the window, staring out with wide eyes before turning to lean against the wall.
“Another down. The manufactory will be working overtime to make up for the damage done in this senseless attack.”
“Who works in it?” Rythi got Kie moving again. He wanted to pick up the pace but it wouldn’t be easy to control their prisoner if they started running. “How many people man these plants?”
“Do not be daft. People do not do such work. We maintain machines, we do not build them.”
“Wait.” Asti stepped closer. “What do you mean you don’t build your machines? Who made all of this if not you? And where are all your soldiers? Why have we run into so few?”
“They are repelling the invaders,” Kie replied. “We do not have a vast army. The bots are there primarily for dangerous maintenance, not warfare.”
“Bots?” Rythi looked at Asti. “Those things they were shooting … they weren’t organic. That’s why they couldn’t get the pieces off.” He rubbed his eyes. “So we’ve only encountered a couple of organics since we were discovered. How many people are there here? And you didn’t answer the question about who built the machines?”
“Our ancestors built them.” Kie gestured ahead. There were stairs at the end of the corridor leading up to a circular room surrounded by pillars. “That is where we are going. Our population numbers just one hundred thousand, scattered all about the planet.”
“What for?” Asti asked. “Why not concentrate them?”
“Our duties keep us busy with the technology.” Kie frowned at her. “Do your people not occupy their entire home world?”
“We do … but …” Asti sighed. “We don’t have machines doing everything for us either!”
“Surely, machines serve you.”
“Not to this extent,” Rythi muttered the words as they arrived at the stairs. At first, he thought they might be made of stone but upon closer inspection, they were metal with a projection to *look* like masonry. There were even age cracks. The room they were entering

held an ancient splendor but he assumed it must've been more aesthetics.
Grass grew in sections, trimmed neatly around the perimeter. In the center, a raised dais held an altar, a square structure tall enough to come up to Rythi's chest. A sterilized scent filled the air, as if the oxygen had been processed of all particulates. It felt strange to breathe it in, even a little painful.
"Is this …" Rythi gestured at the room, "the foundation?"
"It is," Kie said.
Rythi peered at the altar before turning to Asti. "What do you think?"
"We need to examine it," Asti replied. "I … I can do it."
"Are you sure? We don't know what will happen."
"I'm sure." Asti motioned to Kie. "Keep an eye on him. We only have room for one unknown right now."
"Be careful." Rythi didn't like the idea of letting her go, felt a rush of protectiveness but he fought it back. Asti had been on her own, just like him. She made her way in a dangerous universe without having him around to back her up or stand in her way. That didn't make it okay to watch her risk herself but he bit his tongue … and waited.

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Cassie fought to maintain focus as the ship lurched about, shaking as they took another hit. She glanced over her shoulder, noting the larger vessel moved straight up, putting themselves in a firing position. Even with Zach's quick reactions, he failed to avoid a full-on assault.
Stay on the scans, Cassie told herself. *The marines need data*.
She had to attack the system-wide interference with several filters before she received an accurate ping on the enemy armor. The information came back sparse and didn't seem to go beyond the fact that they had power assisted limbs and a dense outer structure. Then, she recognized that the equipment *did* return a full schematic.
That isn't armor, Cassie thought. *Those are robots!*
"Heat, do you read?" Cassie spoke quickly. "You're not fighting organic targets! Those are AI driven shells."

“Great to know!” Heat called back. The sound of carnage competed with his voice, explosions and other racket making it hard to hear him. “How do we break through to hurt them, Cassie? They’re kind of ignoring our beam weapons!”

Maybe they use the same reactive technology as the ships. Cassie hummed as she worked, tapping through a quick simulation. She was right. The armor didn’t so much absorb the attacks as reflect them, stopping the blast before it could do any appreciable damage. *That explains so very much.*

“Salina,” Cassie turned to her colleague, “have you figured out a way to compensate for the shields yet?”

“Negative,” Salina replied. “I’ve tried altered frequencies and a dozen other options. However, they don’t seem to be able to handle projectiles. The mass drivers are hitting their hulls, pounding into the armor. It will just take quite a bit of those to get through. Even our missiles are just chipping away at them.”

“Bombers could help,” Cassie offered. “Or we could try to launch them from here but they may have automated defenses.” She returned her attention to the problem on the surface, running a simulation where she modulated the beam attacks against the enemy shields. Randomization *might’ve* worked. “Heat, are you in cover?”

“I’m crouched behind a big ass box if that counts,” Heat shouted back. “Why?”

“I need you to adjust your weapon’s beam frequency. Use your wrist com to enter the following number: seven-three-seven-two-seven-one.”

“What will that do?”

“Make it fire at random frequencies,” Cassie replied. “It might get you through their reactive armor. Otherwise, you’ll need projectiles. If that works, I’ll send the word to everyone down there.” She paused. “Do you have casualties?”

“Some. A few from the drop, a couple since we charged what looks like a hangar. We’re making progress toward the greatest power source here though. If these are AI, where the hell are all the people?”

“Ahead of you,” Cassie said. “You have a waypoint that should put you in the center of them. Just keep moving … and let me know if

that weapon modification works! It might be something we can use up here in our own fight."
"Roger that!" Heat dropped off the line temporarily and she turned her attention to the ships they were fighting. The Gnosis shook again, the lights flickering this time. Salina called out the damage report, indicating shields dropped below fifty percent. Hull damage seemed to be over living quarters.
At least it wasn't a breach. Thank God they don't know where to hit us, Cassie thought. *I wonder if that's a good thing … or not.*

***

Dennis spun around as one of the drones skimmed his underbelly, causing the proximity meter to flash wildly. The light was accompanied by an obnoxious buzzing and his shields flared all around the ship, cutting down visibility. His computer automatically adjusted the HUD with a wireframe scan of all obstacles, allowing him to evade a collision.
Pulling the trigger, he caught a target on a quick pass by, climbing sharply to avoid it as the thing tried to clip him with a swift motion of its own. The design of the drones made them the perfect projectile all by themselves. They didn't have to use weapons to do plenty of damage.
Several of their opponents experienced dramatic hull damage. Visible holes dotted the hulls of their targets but the ships kept moving. *We have to get the power sources!* But those seemed to be shielded, or at least far more difficult to hit than anticipated. The space battle proved a challenge because the AI ships had no limitations.
Over the city, Raptor reported they were scoring fairly well because the oxygen nullified some of the robot's advantage. They still experienced some damage and even a couple losses. Pahxin fighters joined them, holding off the rush while their shuttles descended. Marines already landed, the battle was underway.
Massive conflicts in three theaters.
Dennis adjusted course, throwing himself into a barrel roll just as his

computer indicated an enemy had a tone lock on him. It wouldn't break, no matter how wildly he maneuvered or how fast he moved. He was going to be hit, there was nothing he could do about it.
When the ship behind him exploded seconds before it fired. Alicia Quinn came alongside him. They'd been scattered during the fight, forced to take the enemy one on one in order to avoid collisions and sporadic weapon fire. He drew a deep breath and let it out before getting back on the com.
"Nice save. Thank you."
"No problem," Alicia replied. "I'm picking up a signal reading from the planet's surface. It might be what's controlling these ships."
"Or updating them with orders," Dennis replied. They had to break their formation suddenly as two more drones tried to ram them, firing wildly.
Dennis's shields dropped to thirty percent. He flipped a switch to redirect power to bolster his defenses. They jumped initially back up to forty and began to steadily climb. He continued to spin, even past the point that he felt ill from the motion of other ships around him. The drones couldn't seem to keep up with him.
Or they think they took me out. It seems like we can fool them by acting like we've taken some heavy damage.
Dennis relayed the information as he leveled out, turning to engage again. The shuttles got away, their payloads already delivered. Fighting the drones kept them from harassing the larger ships, from attacking the Gnosis or the Stalwart while they battled the capital vessels. *It would be nice to help them out rather than keep these tied up here.*
Somehow, the drones never seemed to come to the idea that they could disengage and flee. They continued the brawl, even as ships they seemed to think they defeated came back to take them on again. Both sides were taking a pounding but the Pahxin-human alliance had the most to lose.
So far, Mustang survived without any losses but it was only a matter of time considering how the AI ships moved and operated.
"Alicia," Dennis said, "what did you propose when you detected that

signal?"
"Send the information to Raptor," Alicia replied. "Have them take it out. Or …"
"Yes?"
"We could just go take care of it. They punched a window through the defensive net. We swoop in there, blow the tower, stop these things from attacking us. Even if it only disrupts their communications for a minute, that's something we can exploit. It might even buy the bigger ships some time."
Dennis both liked the idea and didn't. Charging the planet sounded ridiculously dangerous but he had an excellent pilot who could probably make the run in short order. "Can you get in there and out fast enough?"
"Easily."
"I'm sending you some help." Dennis called out to Dala. "Can you accompany Quinn on a crazy op? We're taking down a tower on the planet's surface."
"I would love to," Dala replied. "You're not coming with us?"
"I'll hold command here and keep things tight. Go for it."
"I'm on your wing, Alicia," Dala said. Dennis saw the two ships speed off toward the planet just as another set of drones came at him. Shane blasted one of them, this time catching the power core in his pass. It blew the AI vessel to pieces but its companion held course, moving with a serious purpose.
Dennis hit his afterburners, giving himself some decent momentum before spinning in place, firing several times in a circle. The attack caused the drone to evade wildly, right into one of its own companions. The two ships broke apart, exploding a moment later. *I guess your proximity detectors weren't able to update that fast*.
Another ship slammed into his side, causing him to spin out of control. Shields dropped to five percent. Hull damage registered on the left wing, indicating he wouldn't be able to fly in atmosphere. He fought to gain control, struggling with the flight stick until the thrusters came back online.
He leveled out some distance from the fight, a variety of red indicators

flashing. Systems rebooted throughout the ship, including life support. It became hot in the cockpit before the air regulated again. The rear thrusters came online, firing as he engaged forward motion again.
“That was way too close!” Shane shouted at him. “I can’t believe you made it through that.”
“Me either,” Dennis replied. “Shields are hosed but I’ll be back shortly.”
I hope you’re right, Alicia, Dennis thought. *For all our sakes*.

***

Heat dropped off the line, preparing to take a shot. The other marines threw grenades, used their missiles to good effect but they were running low on that ammo. Their robot opponents dodged around, jumping from cover to cover with the same agility as the jump jets allowed.
“Here goes,” Heat muttered. He popped out of cover, took aim and fired at the first of the bots. The shot hit the shoulder, making the thing stumble backward. That was more reaction than he saw the first time one of them took fire. He pulled the trigger a second time, this time blasting it in the chest.
The torso armor popped open, revealing circuitry beneath.
“It worked!” Heat fell back to cover just as searing heat caught his left shoulder, knocking him down to his knees. Sliding sideways, he fell back against the metal box he’d been standing behind before.
His HUD showed a rapid deployment of coolant to his shoulder as some power actuator nearly overloaded. The direct hit from the alien gun caused a massive influx of heat to scorch his protective gear but it didn’t get through. All indicators showed he escaped uninjured, if a bit seared.
Cooked, more like it. “It worked, guys!” Heat shouted on the com. “I’m sending you the settings. Get to cover. Reprogram the beams. Repeat, everyone set their weapons to randomized frequency. It screws with their defenses. Our ticket to finish this up.”
“Are you alright?” Fielding asked. The chaos going on around them

made it hard to make out. The pain started to subside in Heat's shoulder as numbness kicked in. He drew a deep breath and winced but even that was only temporary. He pushed himself back up, preparing to re-enter the fight. "Heat, can you hear me? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Heat replied. "Just got skimmed on the back. We gotta make another push and get out of this room, heading out to that power source if we want to take care of this."

Fielding called out for a charge. Heat stood as he finished the cry and moved out from his cover, using his jump jets to give him a quick burst of speed. Opening up, he blasted the first target that he saw, knocking it against a wall. Before he could take another shot, he dodged to the side to avoid a full body tackle and blasted away at his attacker.

His beam harmlessly reflected off his back but a second one opened him up. *So random doesn't necessarily mean perfect.* Heat landed and dashed forward, lights flashing all around him, scorching the ground near his feet. His fellow marines made their way through the room, tearing through the enemy defenses.

They reached the next open archway, finding they'd pushed back four of the defenders until they held up in the next room. Pahxin reinforcements closed behind them, lining up like a firing squad in two rows. Their commander stepped forward, a man Heat only briefly met prior to the mission. His name was Aethon.

"They've withdrawn," Aethon said. "I don't mean to point out the obvious but I was under the impression these were machines. Why would they flee us?"

"Good question," Fielding took point on that conversation. He was pressed against the side of the wall, remaining in cover while the Pahxin stayed in the open, ready to fire at anything that came through the door. "Maybe they've got … I dunno … self-preservation code? Heat, help me out here."

The ground trembled from a deep boom, an explosion elsewhere in the area. "I don't think it matters, sir," Heat replied. "I think we need to get to that power station as quickly as possible and if there are only

four enemies between us and that objective well …" He shrugged. "I feel like we need to make another charge."
"Dude …" Gillet came up behind Heat. "What the hell happened to your shoulder piece? It's practically slagged."
"Got grazed by one of their weapons. Why?"
"It's bad …" Gillet stepped away as Vine and Kelly joined them.
Vine sounded off, "rear flank is secure for the moment, sir. Pahxin are holding the area but the shuttles had to withdraw far to the south to avoid further conflict. Raptor's still engaged, they're taking a beating up there. We have to do something fast or they're going to have to pull out … along with our rides."
Fielding nodded. "Alright, men. Let's push forward." He turned to Aethon. "We can at least take a shot from their weapons so we'll push on through first. Vine, Kelly, jump through and give us some cover from the other side of that hall. I'm thinking the four combatants we saw are taking cover on the other side of the door.
"The rest of you follow my lead. I'll go first. Hopefully the distraction will give us a flanking shot. Let's move!"
Heat took position against the wall opposite Fielding. The other marines stood behind Vine and Kelly as they prepared to throw themselves into the next room. The Pahxin stepped aside, facing the archway diagonally.
"This is Lieutenant Alicia Quinn from Mustang Squadron," the voice cut into their coms. "We are coming down to take out a signal tower near your location. Please confirm that you are in a secure location that won't result in you being … well … crushed."
"We're in the building," Fielding said. "About to penetrate further. Show me the coordinates on my HUD before we proceed, over."
Heat saw them too. The pilots were attacking a location roughly half a mile away from where they were. *Shouldn't be any problem*, he thought. *Providing it doesn't cause some kind of chain reaction*.
"We should be okay. Good luck, Lieutenant." Fielding nodded to Vine. "You two are up. Make some magic, guys."
Vine and Kelly both crouched, leaning forward like long-distance runners taking the starting line. Their thrusters engaged, whining for

half a second before launching them both through the door, turning them both into a blur. Weapons buzzed as they entered the room, the enemy forces taking shots at them as they sailed by.
Their landing sounded like metal crushing metal, the screech of their boots against the floor bouncing off the walls. Heat knew if he hadn't been wearing his helmet, the sound would've made his teeth ache and his ears ring. The shooting went loud, beams cast back and forth though none made it through the archway.
"We've got their attention!" Kelly yelled. "But there are a hell of a lot more than four in here, sir! Backup would be appreciated!"
Fielding charged in first, followed by Heat. The others fell in behind them, their armored boots clattering on the metal deck. The Pahxin shouted, following at a greater distance. They continued their support role, allowing the armored behemoths to take point in what would likely be a quick and brutal fight.
Kelly screamed. Vine called, "man down!"
Heat turned sharp right as he entered the door, firing into one of the armored bots. He pulled the trigger half a dozen times, unsure which caused damage and which didn't. The thing danced backward, colliding with the wall before sliding down, its weapon lying a few feet away.
Fielding and the others opened up as well, tearing into the enemies. Heat dove forward as several shots cut the air inches from his head. He engaged his thrusters, carrying him down the hall toward cover. Something hard collided with him on the right, knocking him into the wall. The thrusters disengaged as he slid down to a sitting position. Three of the armored bots came toward him. They didn't seem to be carrying their beam weapons. One of them must've rammed him out of the air, shoulder struck him into the wall. He lifted his own weapon, pulling the trigger from the hip.
Nothing happened. The panel on the side sparked and Heat tossed it aside, scampering to his left away from the approaching enemies. They picked up the pace, running after him. He engaged his thrusters again but one of them shorted, tossing him to the left unexpectedly. Still, it bought him some distance and that's what he needed. Spinning

in place, he launched his own missiles, the last two. They connected with the ground just in front of his pursuers, sending them flying back against the wall. Two of them continued to move but one was missing a leg.

Won't have to worry about him but I need a gun. Now.

"I'm unarmed, folks," Heat said, dashing back toward the archway where the Pahxin were located. Gun battles raged all around him, marines exchanging fire with the AI bots. As if in accompaniment, more explosions shook the ground. Those around him fought to maintain their footing, even the bots.

Must be the pilots. Heat wondered if they took out their tower yet. The lights flickered overhead. *This could be bad*.

"Heat," Vine shouted, "I'm on my way and have a gun. Hang tight … or better yet, meet me half way."

Heat crawled to his feet and dashed in that direction, away from the other bots but into the fray of a larger battle. He cursed under his breath, keeping his head down as he hustled along. Vine was on the other side of the room. They'd meet in a few moments.

One of the windows shattered. Wind rushed in. Heat from an explosion, one of the drones going down, filled the room. Heat dropped to the floor, this time his ears ringing despite the helmet. He saw others lying down as well, each shaken to the floor by the tremor. He struggled to rise as footsteps behind him vibrated the ground… .

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Chapter 9

Alicia led the way with Dala flying to her left and slightly behind. They broke through the window to the surface of the planet, rushing toward the target area. Raptor continued to engage the enemy there, occupying the fighters long enough to keep them off the approaching two ships intent on a little sabotage.

I hope this has a purpose, Alicia thought. *Otherwise, we'll have left the wing behind for nothing more than a worthless tower in the middle of a lot of random technology*.

The moment she broke the cloud coverage, Alicia looked out over a vast network of high-tech buildings stretching off as far as the eye could see. There were no trees, no foliage to speak of and structures lined the hillsides and mountains. Scans showed the oxygen was perfectly clean, no pollution or particulates littered the air.

They've done wonders on this planet. Alicia looked to the left and right, marveling at the sheer magnitude of what she saw. *This is truly incredible. Too bad they were hostile the second we showed up*.

"We're approaching the fight," Dala said. "This could get a little messy."

"Dimitri," Alicia said on the com. "Do you read? This is Lieutenant Quinn. We're almost at your position. How're things going?"

"We've lost two pilots," Dimitri replied. "We may have to withdraw unless you're here to supplement us."

"I'm afraid we're after a signal tower." Alicia sent him the coordinates. "We'll stick around to help you out when we wrap it up though. Buy the marines some more time with their mission so they don't have to wait for a pickup." She checked her scans. The shuttles retreated to the nearby hills where there didn't seem to be any enemies.

At least they're safe.

"We have some gun emplacements," Dala announced. "We'll want to fly low so they can't track us."

"Oh good." Alicia smirked. "I love trench flying." She dropped her altitude even further, taking them down below the tallest buildings.

“Dimitri, hang in there. We’re already on our approach … though it could be dicey to be totally honest.”
“Don’t get yourself killed,” Dimitri said. “Fortunately, they seem to be focused on the ships up there … maybe they don’t know what kind of threat you and the marines represent yet.”
“No one here knows what threat we’re dealing with,” Alicia said, dodging a particularly tall antenna. “Okay, gotta concentrate now. Talk soon.”
The guns Dala talked about started firing, casting quick beams up into the sky. As predicted, they were too close for their automated targeting to lock on. It gave them the advantage of being able to dodge but that was small comfort when confronted with flying in tight quarters *and* avoiding the buildings.
It was like flying through the streets of New York City. Lights on the building blurred as Alicia passed by, looking much like the beam attacks she was trying to avoid. Differentiating them came down to color. The attacks were light blue, the others were red and white, gold and purple.
Dala went even lower, practically skimming the ground between the structures. Alicia considered herself to be somewhat crazy but that was even too much for her. *Dennis would be amused to hear me say that*.
The signal was just up ahead, another twenty seconds of flying and they’d be there.
But that’s a lifetime in these close quarters. Why the aliens had guns placed where they did made no sense to her. Alicia would’ve thought they’d keep them up high, to provide anti-air cover to prevent attackers from getting into such a dangerous position. Instead, they positioned weapons pretty much all over the place, covering from above and below.
Alicia dodged to the left, narrowly avoiding a quick spray of energy weapon fire but her shields skimmed the building beside her. She leveled out, climbing to go over a lower building then pressed straight on toward another structure. This one, she went around to the right. Dala took the left.
“Meet on the other side?” Alicia asked. “Do we know this is going to

work?"
"Flying by instinct, I'm afraid," Dala said. "I hope it works out."
It's like I found the Pahxin version of myself. "I knew there was a reason I liked you." *Even if it's like looking in a reflection of total crazy*.
Alicia tilted so she was flying sideways, pushing hard as turret fire slapped the wall behind her. A heavy wind rushed around her, causing turbulence that rocked her ship. She fought the stick, nursing the throttle to maintain control. When she came around the building, she leveled out, though not before her shields flared from another contact.
I love those damn shields. Alicia shook her head as her targeting computer kicked online, beeping noisily. *Sheesh, I've got it. We're close.*
"Dala, did you come out okay?" Her partner was not anywhere near her. She must've been deposited several blocks away. "Are you still with me? Scans are a little funky down here."
"I'm okay," Dala said. "Took a little damage back there from that wind breeze. Few shots hit the bottom shields but I'm on target."
Three blasts connected with Alicia and she resisted the urge to climb immediately, pressing on. *That turret only has me for a moment*. The tower loomed ahead. She pulled the trigger, blasting away at the side of it. All direct hits but nothing seemed to happen. The last thing she wanted was to have to make another pass.
Deploying all of her missiles, she opened up with mass drivers as well. Every shot pounded the side of the tower, laying into it until smoke rose from the hole but even that assault didn't bring it down. Alicia found herself less than eighty meters away. She hit the afterburners and buzzed the tower, veering around it to the left.
"I'll have to make another run if you don't do it, Dala," Alicia said. "And I'm out of projectiles. Just got guns and beams left."
More shots hit her in the rear, dropping her shields below fifty percent. She redeployed power to the rear and climbed, giving herself some distance from the attacking guns. She spun, rolling as the weapons continued firing at her, kept at her from multiple directions. It became clear staying below the city line was far safer.
They battered her shields, even as she continued straight up with full thruster burn. Alicia's shields dropped to thirty, twenty … ten … she

redirected energy again but it decreased her speed. Especially with gravity fighting to keep her down. When the guns finally stopped, she'd made it nearly fifteen thousand feet up.

Automated repair worked on some minor systems damage, nothing that would prevent her from flying but if she went down there again, she might not come back. That attack run proved to be far more intense than she anticipated or at least leaving did. *Not to mention finding the window we have to leave through could prove troublesome.*

The defensive net around the planet was unlikely to be tied to the tower. That meant blasting her way off the planet, though perhaps from the rear it would be easier than they had it going in. "Dala, how're you doing?" Alicia glanced down, noting more flames coming up from the city, more drones crashing into the city.

"Hold on," Dala replied.

Alicia saw several energy blasts followed by a series of quick streaks of blue. Dala's attack slammed into the tower from the other side, beams glancing out the other side. It didn't seem to do the trick, remaining standing. She was about to call for her partner to abort when the Pahxin did something unexpected.

Hitting her afterburners, Dala jammed herself to the left, sliding into the building so her shields flared. That contact sent the tower toppling, dropping it slowly over into a nearby building before crashing down on the ground below. Smoke rose from the damage followed by a rush of flames.

"Holy crap!" Alicia cried. "You got it! I can't believe you did that … but good job! Wow. Be careful as you pull out of there. I took a serious ass kicking."

"I'll stay low for a moment so my shields recharge," Dala said, "then we can join the others. Has the signal died?"

Alicia checked her scanners. "It's definitely weakened. There must be another tower elsewhere on the planet but I think we could jam it at this point. I'll report in! That was amazing, Dala! Thanks for the help!"

"No problem. Now let's help the other pilots so we can get out of here."

***

Ulian peered at the damage report after the Stalwart took an especially brutal hit from multiple sources. They took care of the scout class enemy vessel, reducing it to little more than slag. The other enemies proved to be more robust, resilient to their attacks. Their discovery of the reactive shielding explained it, they just needed a way around the tech.

The remaining two enemies began to coordinate their attacks after the smaller one exploded. Their programming allowed for perfect timing, a level of connectivity that even the best trained Pahxin fleets lacked. They could put down some hurt but there was always *some* delay. Erda Walar, the Stalwart pilot, did a reasonable job of keeping them mobile to avoid some of the attacks but the enemy proved too persistent with only a minimal recharge time between their attacks. Reports showed they had taken a pounding on various decks with minor damage to systems and some hull scuffing.

We're holding our own, Ulian thought. *We'll even likely win but what about the Gnosis?*

The human ship was not as well armed as the Stalwart, not specifically designed for battle. They'd made some upgrades, taken the time to ensure it was more effective at combat but they might not have been able to handle a prolonged conflict. Of course, they started with only two ships, the smaller of them in fact.

"These ships move oddly," Morala said. "Without personnel on board, they don't suffer from having to keep them alive. They're jumping about, thrusters throwing them here and there to avoid our attacks."

"What do you propose?" Ulian asked. The ship shook again just as Erda fired their own weapons. "We're doing what we can against them."

Morala stared at the screen for a moment before turning to Viran Des, their tech officer. "I want you to issue a massive burst of static at the enemies. Use the entire ship as a booster antenna if you can. Direct it on the larger of the two ships and make it continuous." She gestured to Erda. "Once that happens, hit them with everything we've got."

Erda and Viran both acknowledged, getting to work.
Ulian smirked. “I think I see your tactic. You intend to disrupt their ability to fire together.”
“And hopefully knock out whatever signal is controlling them … if there is one. They could have supercomputers on board, but I somehow doubt it. It seems to me controlling them remotely from the planet makes the most sense. Plus, it explains why they’ve stuck so close to their world … it’s like they’re testing the boundaries of how far they can go.”
“An interesting assertion.” Ulian nodded. “I like the way you’re thinking.” He leaned back. “I just hope this works … and quickly.” He turned to the terminal again, considering the communications pod. Diplomacy clearly failed. It was time to call in the remainder of the fleet. Perhaps an overwhelming display of force would get them talking.
“Viran,” Ulian said, “after you’ve finished blasting them with noise, engage the communications buoy. I want the fleet here as soon as possible.”
“Initiating the interference burst now,” Viran replied. “I can hit them with the surge for roughly ninety seconds before we cut into necessary power reserves. This … is going to be a little uncomfortable for the crew though. I’ve sent a quick warning and a countdown cycle for them to be aware of.”
“Understood.” Ulian gripped the arms of his chair as the enemy hit them again, this time making his monitor flicker. “Make it fast. We can only tolerate this action for so much longer.”
Erda maneuvered them to face the two enemies with their bow, steadying the ship even in the wake of another attack.
“I’m doing it now!” Viran shouted. Ulian glanced back in time to see her wince as she tapped her console, gritting her teeth. The ship began to vibrate, the deck and chairs shaking violently. A high-pitched noise emanated from the walls, grating on the nerves and making teeth ache.
“Ninety seconds of this?” Ulian shouted, pressing his hands against his ears. “It better work!”

“Fire!” Viran shouted. “Start shooting them now!”
Erda cried out as he removed one hand from his own ears, tapping through the firing sequence. The weapons discharged, energy beams casting out at the larger of the two vessels. Ulian squinted to see what happened, noting that the beams cut right through the hulls, melting massive holes in the side of the ship.
“It worked!” Ulian said. “Their reactive shields did not engage! Keep at them, Erda! Go! Go! Go!”
The pilot moved slowly as he went through the sequence. Pain from the interference must’ve been unbearable but he continued on regardless. Another series of attacks sliced into the larger of the two ships, slagging the bow and tearing one of the rear thrusters in half. A few moments later, the interference stopped.
Ulian slumped as did Erda but the pilot lifted his shaking hands, continuing to control the ship. He was pale, covered in sweat but kept at it, fighting through the discomfort. The enemy ships remained motionless as the Stalwart continued their assault, their weapons discharging in rapid order.
“Power reserves were tapped,” Viran said. “Recharge in progress but I’m not sure how long it’s going to take, not while we’re still in battle. Oh! Communication buoy has been activated as well. The fleet should receive the message any moment.”
“Very good.” Ulian rubbed his forehead, turning to Morala. “Good plan. I just wish it wouldn’t have been so … painful.”
“You and me both.” Morala looked green. “Viran, let the Gnosis know that worked. See if they can do something similar. It might help them with their own problems … though we should be able to participate in that fight momentarily.”
“We need to finish quickly,” Ulian said. “I’d like to offer some ground support. Keep damage reports coming and try to target the weak points. Spraying these ships isn’t going to do us much good.”

***

Rythi moved closer to the stairs leading to the dais, watching as Asti

paced around the altar. She didn't say anything and Kie remained silent as well, watching her with wide eyes. It looked like nothing might happen, that she was wasting her time when she reached her hand out to touch it.

"Wait!" Rythi called. His voice made Asti pause and look at him. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. We don't have any idea how much power is rushing through it … or if you'll cause some kind of dangerous reaction."

"We don't have a scanner," Asti said. "We have to find a way to interface with it."

Rythi turned to Kie. "You must have some sort of device you can use to show us data on this thing. Wait, can you tell us how to interface with it? How do we interact with the foundation?"

Kie sighed. "When we wish to bring candidates to test for divinity, we have them kneel before the altar there." He gestured to the side opposite where Asti stood. "They bow their heads and touch the symbols."

Asti walked around, kneeling in the position he suggested. "I can see what he's talking about," she said. "There are indentations here. Symbols. And the ground's softer beneath me." She glanced over her shoulder. "Should I try it?"

"I don't know." Rythi frowned. "I … guess so. It might be our only chance to figure this out." He glanced over his shoulder. "Why are we still alone, Kie? Where is everyone? Where are all your people?"

"Most of them are hiding in our shelters," Kie replied. "The foundation tells us when we must be present for the arrival of a ship, when we should travel, and when we must hide to protect ourselves."

"And speaking of protection," Rythi continued, "what happens when someone's not deemed worthy?"

"The foundation does not speak to that individual." Kie lifted his shoulders. "At least, that is our belief. No one has ever been deemed divine. Not so far. We had high hopes that the return of this most recent batch would change that."

"What made us special?" Asti asked.

"Time. Prophecy. The others, we believed they were leading to this

point." Kie slumped. "But nothing so far. We were preparing for the ceremony when the aggressors arrived. The attack, the violence raging over the planet right now, must end before we can continue. However, since you have all escaped, I do not know what will happen next."
"I suppose we find out what happens." Asti drew a deep breath. "Wish me luck, Rythi."
"I don't like this at all," Rythi muttered. "But go ahead."
Asti drew a deep breath then placed her hands on the indentations. Nothing happened. She remained in the position for several moments as they all remained silent. Rythi let out a breath, tension lifting just in time for her to cry out, throwing her head back as her entire body stiffened.
"What's happening?" Rythi shouted at Kie. "What's going on?"
"It's attempting to communicate," Kie said. "This happens to everyone."
"And then what?"
Kie shrugged. "They die."
"You didn't say that!" Rythi shoved him to the side, dashing up the stairs. He grabbed Asti around the waist and pulled her free, letting her fall on her side. She gasped for air, hyperventilating. "Relax, breathe … try to calm down, Asti. Please. You'll be okay. Just … relax. It's over."
"I … saw … things …" Asti muttered. "Power … visions … it was … incredible."
"Don't talk." Rythi held her hand. "Please, just try to breathe. You'll be fine."
She opened her eyes, turning to look up at him. They seemed strange, an odd color of light blue that faded back to her normal green. "You have to touch it, Rythi. It's calling out to you. It … it needs you to see what the foundation is all about. I saw you and your ship, Gizan … the fall of the Tol'An. So much … information …"
Asti collapsed, passing out. For a brief moment, Rythi swore she died but her chest continued to rise and fall. He turned his attention to Kie who stared wide eyed at them both. "You were going to let her die. You said that it didn't speak to them! You didn't say anything about it

hurting people!"
"I believed that was implied." Kie held up his hands. "But she's survived! And she brings back the holy word! The divine has been revealed! You *must* touch the foundation! See what it says to you. This is your destiny!"
"There's no way I'm touching that thing." Rythi stood, glaring at Kie. "The only reason she lived is because I pulled her off of it. You think I'm going to sacrifice myself to it? Just die? You're insane!"
"I am not! This is your destiny as she said." Kie pointed. "Do it! I will pull you free. I must hear the word! I must know the divinity! I must! Please! This is what you were meant to be. We brought you here and now is the time to prove the point. I beg of you. Do not let us continue a pointless existence."
"I'm not here to make you have a purpose!" Rythi looked down at Asti. "And she … she almost …"
"She implored you!" Kie pointed at the altar. "You can understand all if you but touch the device. Believe me, I will not let you die. No one ever told us we could touch a person who contacted the foundation. I must know what it says. You *will* survive. I know it with all my heart and soul."
Rythi considered the situation. He didn't have a lot of choice. He needed to know how to escape, to understand the technology if he wanted to leave. Asti might have that information but she wasn't doing so well. *Maybe I can do it. This fool seems to think it's possible. There's not a lot of other options here.*
Rythi sighed. "How can I trust you, Kie?"
"I did not attempt to capture you when you rushed to help her." Kie pointed at Asti. "And I want to hear the word more than I want to be free."
"I see." Rythi set the weapon down beside Asti. "I guess I … have no choice." He knelt before the foundation. "This is insane. The stupidest thing I've done in my entire life." *I can't believe I'm about to do it anyway*. He drew a deep breath, preparing himself for searing pain … for the sensation that made Asti throw her head back and scream. *Here I go*. Rythi thrust his hands forward into the indentations, against

the cool metal, closing his eyes … and waiting.

***

The Gnosis trembled so violently the artificial gravity couldn't keep up, making the entire vessel feel as if it tilted to the left. Cassie held tight to her console, watching as her screen flickered off then back on a moment later. The system rebooted, a line appearing to show the progress.

A moment passed before the ship leveled out. Cassie slapped the side of her console, cursing loudly. Salina dropped to the floor, pulling the panel beneath her terminal. After pulling a couple wires, a spark popped. Lights went down then came back on strong. Screens came back to life.

Cassie's terminal finished rebooting.

"Report!" Desmond shouted. "What the hell just happened?"

"One of the other ships," Zach said, "the Stalwart finished off the larger of them. The explosion knocked us for a loop."

"Shields are down," Salina said. "Power's out on half the ship. Systems are rebooting. Engineering had to don hazard suits until further notice. We've … got casualties. Five deaths, twelve injuries so far."

"How did the other ships make out through this? Vincent asked. "And the Stalwart? Get them on com."

"External coms are still down," Salina said. "Cassie, is your station restored?"

"Sort of … I'm scanning the ships." Cassie brought up the application, tapping her foot when it took a moment to launch. It showed the enemy vessels were offline, drifting away from the Gnosis. "That's why we haven't been shot again. They're down." She brought up the main view screen. "Look! They're not registering any power."

"The signal burst," Salina said. "That must've done it. Damn it! We need to talk to the Stalwart. They still have power but thrusters seem to be offline. I've got readings from when the enemy reactor went up but my database is still offline. I won't be able to measure the magnitude for another few moments."

The internal com went crazy at Desmond's station. Chief Webber's voice came through, competing with static. "Captain, life support was severely damaged in that explosion. We've got oxygen for about an hour and a half. I need everyone to put on hazard suits until we finish the repairs."

"We'll let the rest of the ship know," Desmond replied. "Salina, get that going. Vincent and Cassie, get down to engineering. Do what you can to help them get systems back online. Especially communications."

"We're on it." Vincent stood, motioning for Cassie to follow. "We can stop and grab hazard suits on the way."

Cassie bolted from her seat. They tried the elevator. It didn't respond. "Great," she muttered. "Looks like we're taking the scenic route."

"Lift is down, sir," Vincent called. "We're taking emergency maintenance." He dropped down and popped the floor panel, revealing a ladder. Lowering himself into the hole, he took the rungs two at a time, descending to the next level. From there, they could take stairs to get down to engineering.

Cassie followed, nearly falling when the ship listed again. "Artificial gravity isn't having a good day either," she said. "Imagine the amount of power this planet can harness!" She got to the next level. Vincent steadied her before they hurried off down the hall. "The destructive power might be matched by the benefits."

"That thing was like a nuclear bomb going off," Vincent replied. "We're lucky it was far enough away to not destroy us completely … or that it didn't start a chain reaction with the other vessels we were engaged with." He glanced over his shoulder. "Our opponents are likely rebooting. If we don't get our defenses up …"

"Yeah, I know what'll happen," Cassie interrupted. "We can't exactly take hull breaches like they can."

"Webber will have everything prioritized by the time we get there." Vincent paused at one of the storage rooms, popping the manual release on the door and cranking it to the side. A row of hazard suits hung up nearby. "Here you go. Time to be uncomfortable for a while."

"Better that than the alternative." Cassie stepped inside and grabbed

one of the small outfits, pacing back into the hall where she had more room. No one seemed to be on that level, no technicians dashing about or repair crews. It made her nervous. Were they all down below, fighting to get the ship back online?

I guess I'll find out soon, Cassie thought. *I hate this race against time. If they send reinforcements, if their own ships come online, we may well be finished. Everyone on board this ship depends on power restoration, defenses coming back up. The next ten minutes may well determine if we survive … or die in the face of the unknown.*

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Chapter 10

Dennis flinched as a bright flash lit up the horizon to his left. He glanced out the cockpit, his heart racing. He swore the Gnosis just went up, detonated in a brilliant explosion. But when the glare cleared, he saw it was one of the enemy vessels. That should've been cause for celebration until his home base began to drift.

"They've stopped attacking!" Shane shouted. "The drones are drifting out here! I nearly ran into one when it stopped moving."

Scans showed the enemy ships lost power, their thrusters going dark. *What caused it?* Dennis thought. *The destruction of that vessel? Or was Alicia successful?* Interference from the planet's surface seemed to lessen somewhat but it was still there. He brought up a comlink, sending a message to the Gnosis first.

"Gnosis, please respond. This is Mustang One." No response came, not even static. *The destruction of the enemy ship may have knocked out their coms temporarily.* He switched over, sending a message to Alicia directly. "Lieutenant Quinn, do you read me? This is Mustang One, please respond."

A garbled transmission came back, definitely her voice but it was hard to make out. It sounded more like a computer speaking than a person. "This … Quinn… . do… . read … Please …"

"You're breaking up," Dennis said. "Did you take out the tower?"

"Destroyed … tower … you … change?"

Dennis boosted his signal, trying again. "Please repeat."

"We took out the tower," Alicia said. This time, she sounded closer. "Did it matter? Did it make any difference?"

"Yeah, it seemed to … but a couple things happened at once." Dennis looked around. "I guess I won't look a gift horse in the mouth though. I can't reach the Gnosis right now so I'm not sure what happened there. One of the larger ships exploded and now they appear to be disabled."

"That's great news," Alicia complained. "And we're stuck down here I think. We have to tear through some defenses but two ships can't do

it. Dala and I took a bit of a beating on our little impromptu assignment." She paused. "The marines are moving on something right now. They might disable the whole damn planet depending on what they find."
"I wouldn't count on that," Dennis replied. "Okay, we'll head your way and see about getting you out of there. Maybe we can punch some more holes in that defensive net."
"Dennis," Shane's voice interrupted. "Look at the Gnosis! One of those ships seemed to wake up!"
Dennis turned in time to see the larger of the drones light up. Thrusters engaged, glowing blue as it turned back toward the planet. A beam of light shot out from its rear, surrounding the Gnosis. A moment later, it began to move, dragging the Earth ship with it, picking up speed.
"Oh my God!" Dennis stared at the scene, mouth open. "They're towing it back to the planet? We have to stop it! Bombers! They could tear through that and I bet they're not disabled. Let's go. Follow my lead, if we're close, we should be able to speak to them via personal com if nothing else. Sorry, Alicia. You have to hold on for a few more minutes."
The Mustang fighters spun around and hit their afterburners, rushing back toward the Gnosis. They could be there in less than five minutes. Dennis's computer indicated that the large drone would arrive at the planet in less than twenty minutes, even with towing the larger craft behind it.
This is what they mean when they talk about a race against time, Dennis thought. His heart pounded hard enough to make him light-headed. *If we don't stop that thing, that defensive net would easily be enough to destroy an unshielded vessel. Let alone whatever else it wants to do with them. No, this has to stop. Now.*

***

Ulian looked over their damage reports, frowning at what he saw. When the larger vessel went up, it caused widespread havoc through

their systems but most of them were still online. Communications were out due to the interference but the real problems came from system shorts and blown circuitry.

"Sir!" Morala interrupted his reading. "Sir, one of the enemy vessels came back online. It's dragging the Gnosis off."

"Do we have thrusters?" He turned to Erda. "Can we move?"

"Negative, sir." Erda shook his head. "Helm is not responding at this time. I'm working with engineering to bring us back up, but they think one of the relays is down with the thrusters. It'll be another few minutes before we can get back up and running."

"I see." Ulian rubbed his chin. "Can we get a message to them? Communications? Are we back?"

"We almost had proximity for personal coms," Viran replied, "but not anymore. They're moving swiftly. They'll be back to the planet in less than twenty minutes at this rate."

"What does that ship want with the Gnosis?" Ulian clenched his fists in frustration. "Morala, put all available technicians on the engine problem. I want maneuverability ASAP. Erda, let me know the second you can move. And Viran, coms. Make them work. I don't care if you have to lean outside and shout, we need to speak to our people."

The fleet would arrive by the time the Gnosis got to the planet. The Pahxin would have an overwhelming force to deal with their adversaries. They'd be able to help with repairs, create a solid perimeter, ensure that the area was secure. *If only I brought them through right when we were attacked.*

I couldn't have known how devastating they would be, Ulian thought. *We needed to assess the situation, attempt a diplomatic solution. I wish I had ordered a full bombardment the second we arrived. That would've been wisdom … that would've been the way to ensure something like this didn't happen.*

But Ulian knew better than to fall into a self-destructive pattern. He shoved it off, contemplating his next move. There was much work to be done, and pity wouldn't push any of it forward. The Gnosis needed him to remain clear and decisive. That was exactly what he intended to be.

***

Heat crawled a good ten paces before something grabbed his foot. A vice-like grip clamped down and yanked. Weightlessness hit him and he went soaring through the broken window, out into the open air. He tumbled once before firing his rockets, leveling himself out and launching back toward the hallway.

His attacker approached another marine so Heat diverted his course, flying straight at the thing's side. Just as it had done to him, he barreled into it, tossing it against the wall even as he fired his retro thrusters to come to a halt some feet away.

A massive dent in the metal structure remained as the AI landed on the floor, remaining on its hands and knees. Fielding shouted something inarticulate, a sound more than words. Heat dropped to the side as an energy beam swept by where his head had been a moment before.

He turned to the right, lifting his arms reflexively to block an overhead blow. The contact vibrated his armor, dropping him to a knee. He retaliated, slamming a fist into the bot's torso. It knocked it back three feet but it came right after him again, moving as if it hadn't been struck at all.

Other marines around him engaged in melee combat, fending off the robots or dodging aside the blows. Something whined nearby, a high pitch sound that grew in volume until it suddenly stopped. The robots fell backward, collapsing to the floor. Explosions outside drew Heat's attention to the window.

Drones dropped from the sky, pounding the ground before erupting into flames.

"What the hell is happening?" Gillet asked. "What's going on?"

"I'm reading a power surge," Fielding said. "Aethon! Bring your men up. Looks like we should be good. Collect weapons, gentlemen. Our fallen …" He paused. "We'll be back for them."

Heat grabbed a rifle off the floor, checking it over. It belonged to one of the other marines, though he couldn't tell which one. It still

functioned, the panel on the side remained intact and bright. He watched the others do the same and as they congregated, a commotion back the way they came drew his attention.
Aethon yelled for someone to drop their weapon. *Can't be a bot if they're talking to it*, Heat thought. He hurried over with Fielding. A group of individuals stood at the end of a hallway, one of them aiming a weapon at the Pahxin soldiers. A dozen rifles remained on the lone gunman, who happened to be wearing a Tol'An uniform.
"We just want off this rock!" The Tol'An shouted. "Don't make me fire!"
"Drop the weapon immediately!" Aethon grunted back. "And we'll talk about getting you out of here."
"Even if you don't like my politics, these people have done nothing to you!" The Tol'An lowered the barrel of his gun. "We were prisoners here, trapped and escaped. I insist that you make room for us in your shuttles and take us out of here right away."
"I don't make deals with terrorists," Aethon replied. He looked at the others. "Who are you people?"
They all started speaking at once, most of them shouting out their professions. One said he was a miner, another a chemist. Each of them advanced, begging to be helped. They wanted off the planet and if they had nothing to do with the inhabitants, then Heat saw no reason not to grant their wish.
"Hold on!" Fielding held up his hands. "Listen to me. We'll help you, but we have a mission to conclude here. We've cleared this area for the most part. You can wait here but I insist that you hand over your weapon! We'll leave people here to protect you."
"How can we be sure of protection?" The Tol'An asked.
Fielding looked at him. "What's your name?"
"Cahl."
"Listen, Cahl," Fielding said, "you'll have to take my word for it. We have no reason to lie to any of you. We just need to get to a power source here so we can stop the hostilities along with the attacks in this region."
"And we don't have much time," Heat added. "So if you want a fight,

let's get it over with so we can finish our mission."
"Alright!" Cahl shouted, dropping the gun. "There, I hope you're happy. We had another two people with us but they took a hostage back that way." He gestured over his shoulder.
"Where to?" Fielding asked.
"I have no idea." Cahl shrugged. "But the fool believed he could learn enough about their technology to escape this forsaken place."
Fielding huffed. "That's the direction of the power source, Heat. I guess we know where we're going at least. Aethon, hold these folks here. We can take care of this alone. Protect them and our way out. We'll stay on coms. Sound good?"
"That works for us," Aethon replied. "Come on, you lot. Let's move into the room and get you to a secure location in case these robots wake up."
Heat started down the hallway, bringing up his scanner. He did a search for Pahxin. Those behind him pinged but then two more showed up as well. Most of the interference seemed to die down, granting him a chance to have a good look at the facility. It was much larger than he anticipated with corridors stretching off miles in several directions.
"He wasn't lying," Heat said. "There are two life signs in this direction. And something else. Not sure what that one is … but maybe these people we're about to meet have figured out the power station."
"Maybe," Fielding said. "Maybe they shut down the power station and we won't have to blow it up. That would be a nice change of pace. Especially if we could just leave at that point."
"I'm pretty sure that's wishful thinking, sir." Heat grinned. "But I'll try to stay optimistic with you there."

***

Rythi threw back his head, mouth open in a silent scream. A sensation flooded his body, not pain so much as an intense intrusion, like pulses of energy dancing all along his nerves. They entered his brain, causing his vision to go dark and his ears to clog up until he couldn't hear

anything at all.
His body stiffened, all muscles tensing up at the same time. This made it impossible to move or to think. He held his breath, teeth gnawing at the insides of his cheeks before a white light burned off to his left. None of his muscles would respond, he couldn't turn or look but simply had to accept that *something* was happening.
The illumination filled his peripheral vision first then closed in about him, enveloping him like a blanket. After several moments, he found himself standing, no longer touching the altar at all but alone in a vast space of nothingness. Something tapped in the distance, echoing as if he stood in an immense cavern.
"Welcome, Rythi Cless, to the foundation."
"Uh … thanks." Rythi cleared his throat. "Can you tell me what that means?"
"You have the blood of the ancestors. The fire of our creation. We, the collective thoughts of an entire race, remain here in this base construct. A foundation upon which we built a self-sufficient, constantly moving society. What you have seen in your short time here came from our efforts thousands of years ago."
"That's incredible," Rythi muttered. "But … I'm sorry, I still don't really understand. What ancestors? Who were they?"
"A race long lost to time. Beings of immense creativity and jealousy. They built and they built … they shared and they envied … and when the worlds ended, they retreated here. Over time, they bred and died. The machines became as gods, providing for the people who no longer understood their function.
"As a result, we have essentially ruled here, granting the people the opportunity to thrive. But stagnation has plagued these individuals. They need guidance to find meaning. Until they have it, they will forever be enslaved to automation. To the comfort we provide."
"Is that why you've brought people here?"
"To discover the right one to lead them into a better era. "Someone who can take our secrets, the power of our technology, and use it wisely."
"You don't think that's me, do you?" Rythi cleared his throat. "I mean,

I'm just a spacer … I'm not even on the right side of the law most of the time. I don't even know where I'd begin."
"You have a practicality about you which these people need. You can save them even as they might save you."
"How?"
"Lead them. Bring them away from this world to integrate into the dominant society. Use this world to forward your scientific understanding of technology and automation, artificial intelligence and all the things machines can do for organic life. But do *not* fall into the same trap as those who came before. We are tools … not crutches."
"But I'm no leader," Rythi said, "and I have no way of speaking to the government, not meaningfully."
"You will have the means with this world at your disposal."
"You haven't *really* answered the question. Why me specifically? There are others … there must have been. You've taken dozens, possibly hundreds."
"Thousands over the years," the machine corrected. "They died when they touched the device, lost because they did not have the blood of the ancestors."
"And I do? How?"
A genealogy appeared as a holographic projection just in front of him, showing his name at the top and going back countless generations.
"This is your mapped family tree dating back to our founders. This is why you have survived."
"But no one else? Not one person has fit this since then?"
"We have come close but they lost their minds, fell into madness instead of following our ways. You are strong-willed. You insisted on escape *and* you made the choice to test your divinity, as the organics call it. That, unto itself, indicates that you have the courage to make a difference."
"Asti did too!"
"She was not going to survive. Had you not pulled her away, she would be dead right now."
Rythi clenched his fists. "You would've killed her!"

“The device tests the blood and it is fatal to those without the right genetic makeup.”
“I …” Rythi knew he needed to remain calm. He couldn’t become angry, not with a machine. It wouldn’t necessarily understand and then he’d get nothing out of it. Instead, he took a calming breath and tried a different tactic. “What do I do to control this technology? How does it work?”
“When you wake, you will have the understanding of the terminal. That will grant you access to all the automation and technology. Every ship, every bot, every system functioning on this planet will be yours to manipulate, modify, and control. You can select your flagship, the one to take these people away … you can do whatever you need to.”
“I see.” Rythi considered that for a few moments. “And can I return here if I have questions?”
“This terminal is for your private use. You will be allowed to join with us at any time. The process can be taxing to the body, however … and you may need to rest upon completion. So you may wish to write down your questions prior to making the connection. However, we welcome you at any time.”
“So how do I wake up right now?” Rythi asked. “What do I do?”
“Say the word and we shall free you.”
Rythi looked around, peering at the white nothing in all directions. He couldn’t think of any other questions, not at the moment. He needed help to know what to do and how to proceed. That meant getting back to Asti but one thing became clear: he’d succeeded. They were going to be free. Escape had become a reality.
“Thank you,” Rythi said. “Please disconnect me from this terminal.”
“As you wish …”
Blackness crept around him. He felt his limbs ache as he recognized his own blood flow, the rise and fall of his chest as he drew a deep breath past his dry throat. His ears popped, his shoulders ached. He opened his eyes and slumped forward, hands slipping from the altar. Asti appeared beside him, gripping his shoulders. She spoke but he couldn’t understand her. Her voice was little more than a high pitch buzz but he saw her lips moving, her brows lift with concern. He held

up his hand to let her know that he was okay … when motion drew his attention to the archway.
Kie spun in place, nearly falling down as a group of armed men burst in on them, aiming their weapons. *Who are they now?* Rythi thought, attempting to stand. He couldn't find the strength in his legs, couldn't push himself up so he remained in his position, keeping his hands aloft.
Asti did the same. *Perhaps these are the men who attacked the planet. Just on the verge of figuring it all out, we have to contend with this. How do I have such terrible luck?*

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Desmond lurched as the ship began to move, nearly falling out of his chair. He turned to Salina. "What exactly is happening now? I thought all the ships out there were disabled. Did our engines just engage?"
"Negative," Salina said. "It appears the larger of the ships just powered up and caught us with a tractor beam. They're taking us back toward the planet. ETA … around fifteen minutes at current speed."
"What about the Stalwart?" Desmond asked.
"Nothing." Salina shrugged. "The ship seems to have ignored them."
"Damn it." Desmond tapped the com, engaging engineering. "Cassie, Vincent, Webber … any of you have an idea of how to bust out of this tractor beam?"
"Scanning now," Cassie's voice came through as if it had too much gain, crackling over the speaker. "We almost have our engines back online but they might not be at full strength before we arrive at the planet."
"I need some ideas, people," Desmond said. "Come on. Figure this out."
"Mustang One is on com," Salina replied. "They've closed to proximity. In fact, it's my personal communicator." She paused. "Go ahead, Mustang One."
"Gnosis," Dennis called out, practically shouting. "We don't have the firepower to hurt this thing out here but bombers would. Can we

launch them? Can you get them out here fast enough to do some damage?"
"Negative," Salina said. "The hangar is on lockdown due to our power issues. They're stuck here for the time behind but … we might be able to launch some bombs manually." She turned to Desmond. "If we have someone load the launchers and set the ordnance to fire their rockets from within the tubes, we should be able to hit the target."
"How will we guide them?" Desmond asked.
"We can set them to lock on the target prior to deployment."
"Tell me how much time it will take."
"Five minutes to get two ready?"
"Go. Do it now." Desmond turned to the com. "Dennis, we have to buy some time. Get over to the Stalwart and see what they can do, if anything. Maybe they've got some ships capable of hitting this thing hard enough."
"Yes, sir. I'm going to leave Mustang Two here so he can relay any message I get. Talk to you soon."
Salina left the bridge. Only Zach and Desmond remained, both unable to do much in light of the situation. It was a strange feeling, to sit in the nearly empty room, bouncing about from the rough way the tractor beam held the ship.
Desmond leaned back in his chair, letting out a sigh. His terminal was online, he was getting reports but everyone was doing their jobs. He knew it was his time to be quiet, to let them work and wait until he was needed. If Dennis got the help they needed or Salina's bomb trick proved successful, they'd be okay.
If not … well, he chose not to be pessimistic. There wasn't any point.

***

Ulian stood, pacing over to Erda's terminal. He peered down at the helm, frowning at the low power meter beside the engines. His next stop took him to Viran. Whatever she was doing, he didn't fully understand. He had to trust she had that under control and would report when done.

“Morala,” Ulian returned to his chair, “anything to report?”
“I’m getting a message from a Gnosis fighter,” Morala replied. “They’re asking if we can deploy bombers to attack that larger ship.”
“Can we?” Ulian asked.
“I’m checking with hangar control now.” Morala hesitated. “Even without the bombers, all our ships might put a dent in the thing. If they concentrate their fire and we get *everyone* involved … it’s worth a shot.”
“We can’t speak to them,” Ulian said. “So we’d have to rely on the Gnosis fighters to relay that information.” He scowled. “Make it happen. That’s more than the nothing we’re doing right now.” He turned to Viran. “My apologies for being impatient but how close are you to having systems back online?”
“Scans are back,” Viran replied, “and coms are rebooting. Two minutes it looks like.”
“So long?” Morala asked.
“Sorry, I’ve prioritized the system but many are rebooting at the same time. I’ve got them queued up properly. We have to be patient.”
“Not the best time for that,” Ulian said. “ETA for the fleet?”
“Ten minutes,” Viran said, “tops. If they departed the moment they received the message that is. Long range scans will be there shortly and I’ll know where they’re at.” She shrugged. “I’m sorry, sir. That explosion had a serious impact on us.”
“That’s alright,” Ulian squeezed the arm of his chair as he spoke, “just keep at it. And get our ships on that bastard taking the Gnosis. We can’t wait for the fleet to free them.”

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Chapter 11

Heat followed Fielding as they charged down a long corridor leading to an archway. The power signature came from that area and a massive burst showed some kind of crazy activity. He'd seen that type of reading before with the Orb technology. *I wonder if we just found a seventh Orb*.

They stepped into a room with a set of stairs leading up to a strange altar. There were grass and pillars but Heat ignored the environment, focusing instead on the man facing them with his hands lifted over his head. A woman crouched beside a kneeling figure by the altar. Both of them looked in their direction, eyes wide.

"Don't move," Fielding barked the words, turning to the others. "Um … Heat? Is this the energy reading?"

"It is." Heat gestured. "The altar thing."

"Who are you people?" Fielding asked.

"I'm Asti," the woman replied. "This is Rythi. We were prisoners." She gestured at the other guy. "That's Kie, one of the natives here."

"What's going on? This … doesn't look like a power station."

"It's some kind of computer," Asti replied. "I accessed it but … it didn't work for me. It almost killed me. Rythi though will have something to say when he's recovered. At least, I believe he will."

"He must!" Kie screamed with a wild zeal. He approached the stairs and dropped to his knees. "He has recovered! The only organic to ever touch the device and walk away! Praise be! Praise!"

"Uh huh." Fielding tilted his head. "So … why are people attacking us, Kie? What's going on? We came here for diplomacy and instead, you started a God damn war. Care to explain?"

"He doesn't know," Rythi muttered. "He's not aware of the situation. This whole place … it's automated. They've been waiting for someone to lead the people away. It asked me to help them integrate into Pahxin society." He pushed himself up, wincing as he did. "They weren't attacking your ships. They were trying to collect the people onboard."

“Fabulous.” Fielding turned to Heat. “I don’t think we have to blow this up.”
“No!” Rythi shook his head emphatically. “You can’t do that! I … I can control this place. I just need some time. The terminal! That’s what it talked about.”
“Sounds good.” Fielding shrugged. “I guess. The fighting stopped for now at least.”
“Alright.” Rythi gestured to the opposite side of the room the marines came from. “We have to go this way. It’s not far.”
“Vine,” Fielding gestured to Kie, “you’re on this fella. Let’s move out.”
Heat glanced around the room, wondering if they should just take out the altar while they had a chance. He tried to reach out to Cassie but the com seemed dead. That didn’t bode well. His HUD showed everything normal on his end. Other frequencies didn’t pan out either. He was about to grab Fielding when someone else hit his com.
“This is Lieutenant Quinn reaching out to ground forces, please respond.”
“This is Sergeant Major Heathrow. What’s going on?”
“We’ve got a big problem,” Quinn replied. “One of the larger vessels is dragging the Gnosis to the planet. After one of them exploded, it took out the power on our capital ships. Now it’s on its way here. All fighters have been called to respond to it, to take out that vessel and free the ship. Any chance you’ll get the power?”
Heat sighed. “Maybe.” He turned to Fielding. “Sir, we’ve got an issue.” He filled him in on what was going on. “It seems to me we need to take care of this now.”
“Hey,” Fielding shouted, “Rythi! We don’t have time to get to this … terminal thing. We need to stop the ships you’ve got going on up there right now. What’s plan b?”
“I don’t know what that means,” Rythi replied.
“The alternative to this terminal!” Fielding moved over to him. “We don’t have time for it! So what can we do? Our ship is being brought back here and God knows what’ll happen to it when it arrives.”
Kie held up his hand, “I know what will happen. The drone will deliver the ship to our visitor bay. That is so we can test their divinity.

That's what's happening."
"Damn it!" Heat slapped his leg. "C'mon, Rythi. You gotta have something else up your sleeve, buddy."
"I can …" Rythi ran his hands through his hair, pacing. He turned his attention back to the altar. "That! I can interface the computers through it. I imagine the thing I talked to will allow me to turn things off there."
"You'd better hope so," Fielding said. "Or we're going to have to take it out." He turned to Heat. "Let them know we're trying something right now but if it doesn't work, we have a backup plan." He paced away as Rythi approached the altar. "Tell them to cross their fingers while you're at it. This feels like a long shot."

***

Cassie worked at one of the engineering terminals, isolating downed relays. Battle generators were online but getting the power to the weapons or shields proved to be a challenge. A message from Salina suggested she was organizing an attack with bombs that would be fired from the tubes on their own volition.
Might work, Cassie replied in text. *Just be sure to have them detonate as far from us as possible*. To that end, she focused on engaging the shields. Bringing them back online, even at a low level, would be essential if the enemy ship exploded. *Not to mention the fact if it actually blows up the same way as the other one, we might be destroyed*.
Webber personally worked on mobility. He was just on the verge of getting the maneuvering thrusters back online, which would help. The problem was those didn't have enough power to break free of the tractor beam. That would require full power. *Why they picked us over the Stalwart makes no sense*.
Vincent shouted from across the room, "hey, we've got coms back!"
"Great!" Webber replied. "Let the bridge know. Where are we at with life support?"
A tech reported they were rebooting the system and should have it back online momentarily. Artificial gravity stabilized on its own,

which helped a lot. No one had to engage magnetic boots or tether themselves to their stations for that matter. That left three major systems to fix and they'd be good to go.

Engines, defenses, and weapons.

"This is Captain Bradford," the voice piped over the speakers. "We're making excellent progress, so well done. Please note that we are rapidly approaching the planet still. I've been in contact with our pilots and they are working with the Pahxin to put some firepower on the enemy ship. We've got another plan as well but it would be better if we had maneuverability.

"Keep it up, folks. We're not out of this yet."

Understatement, Cassie thought. *But I understand. He's just trying to keep us focused. As if we have any other way to be all things considered*. She drew a deep breath, attempting another route for the shields. The relays themselves were undamaged but the application that utilized them was having a hard time connecting to the sensors.

Rerouting took time. Running simulations to see which ones allowed her to access them and which ones didn't require patience, a luxury they really didn't have. To that end, she ran such a thing but then tried to reroute anyway, essentially guessing at what might be available. After four failed attempts, a simulation came back successful.

Plugging that in, power showed restored to defenses. It made her heart leap because the shields actually began recharging. They jumped immediately to twenty percent, climbing slowly after that. "We've got basic defenses!" Cassie yelled. "Recharge rate is slow though. I'm trying to pick up the pace now."

"Is life support back?" Webber asked.

"Reboot successful!" The tech called. "Yes! Everything's processing normally. That's a success!"

"Engines aren't being as kind," Webber replied. "They don't want to ignite. Working on it now."

We might survive an explosion, Cassie thought, *but we aren't getting away without the engines.* She brought up Webber's dilemma on her terminal but had no idea what it meant. Instead, she returned to the defenses.

Check, I have to rely on his expertise. Fresh starting an entire starship never occurred to me. I can see why it's a terrible idea.
"I'm going to help Salina," Vincent said. "She's getting some bombs ready for deployment. I'll be back."
"Good luck!" Cassie shouted after him. "Be careful!"
Please, God let him be careful. Cassie forced herself to focus on the relays, trying to find a better path for the defenses. *Keep busy, girl. That's the best way to get through this*.

***

Vincent arrived at the weapons bay where a crew huddled around two bombs. Salina used a tablet nearby, tapping swiftly. He approached, peering over her shoulder. She was programming the targeting parameters, ensuring that the two weapons would find their mark and detonate at the right time.
"What can I do to help?" Vincent asked. "And do we know that this is a good idea?"
"It's a terrible idea," Salina replied, "but it's the best chance we have to at least slow this ship down. It'll buy us time to repair the engines." She glanced at him. "We need to clear the missile tubes over there. Those are directed down at the moment. I want the bombs to deploy away so they climb and hit the enemy on the opposite side of us."
"Seems reasonable." Vincent moved over and helped coordinate the removal of the ammunition. They put the missiles on a rack with others, allowing two crewmen to secure them while the others went back to unloading the tubes. "Will the bombs fit?"
"Barely," Salina said. "Luckily, we're not using the firing mechanisms, just the route out of the ship."
Vincent approached her again, lowering his voice. "What're the chances they'll get stuck? Why aren't we using the turrets we used before?"
"Those are completely offline," Salina said. "We can't even open them. I measured. The fit's tight but these *will* make it out."
Vincent helped them finish clearing the tubes and stood back, waiting

as patiently as he could. The others around him stirred as well. They were all ready to make something happen but he figured they were also not entirely comfortable standing around a couple of bombs that were pretty much primed and ready for launch.

"They're good." Salina turned to the tubes. "Let's get them loaded and prepare for launch."

Vincent helped them move the bombs, everyone taking care how they handled it. Six people lifted the first one, setting it gently against the hole before shoving it in. The second one received the same level of caution. Tension filled the deck, not only because of the armed ordnance but due to the need to hurry.

It was impossible to know what would happen when they arrived at the planet. Would the automated defenses kick on? Was that why the ship dragged them that way? Or did they have some intention of crashing them into the world? Had they been captured in a sense, being dragged off to a holding area?

The aliens chose not to communicate so they might never find out the intentions. Especially if the bombs took out the problem. *What's next though? Do we bombard the surface of their planet?* Vincent couldn't imagine they would do something so … brutal. *Maybe the Pahxin fleet would.*

He hadn't been able to look at their history but they when they found out about the Tol'An home base, they sent quite the force. After the battle, they swept the whole planet, remaining there long after the Gnosis and Stalwart returned to Earth. *They might be the type to remove a threat utterly when given a chance*.

"They're loaded!" Vincent announced. "We're ready to go."

"Alright," Salina said, "clear the area, team. We need to get well away. Those will be loud when their engines kick on but there's a chance they'll heat up the area in a major way."

They fell back to the next room, sealing the door behind them. Salina turned to her tablet. "Wish us all luck." She tapped something on the screen, a high-pitched squeal erupted through the bulkhead, causing the walls to tremble. The temperature went up noticeably but not nearly as bad as it likely was inside.

“They’re off.” Salina turned to Vincent. “We’ll know if it worked in a little less than a minute.”
Sixty some seconds could determine so many things, Vincent thought. *Whether we live, die, or even remain in this ship’s clutches. I can really do without this much intensity.* He dialed up Captain Bradford to let him know what was happening.

***

Dennis led the massive squadron of vessels as they raced to meet the Gnosis, weapons armed and ready to go. All of them pushed full speed, meaning a few of the Pahxin fighters started to pull ahead. Those still near the surface remained in place, unable to take on the defensive network if it still presented a problem.
Twenty-five ships charged their target and if they were lucky, they might be able to free the Gnosis before they reached the planet. A message came through when they were just about to open fire, a comlink from Commander Bowman. He set it at high priority and through the normal channels as opposed to private.
They must’ve pulled a system back online! Dennis felt some relief at that. It meant they were close to recovery.
“This is Arden, I read you. What’s going on?”
“We’re launching two bombs,” Vincent replied. “They’re on their way and will make contact in less than forty seconds. If you’re close, you might want to let them make contact before you start an attack run.”
“Roger that.” Dennis switched to the tactical comlink. “All ships, break off your attack run. I repeat, break off the attack run.”
“Sir?” Shane asked. “That … sounds crazy! Why would we do that?”
“Don’t have time to explain.” Dennis pulled up, putting some distance between him and the two ships. “Just pull out and reform at my coordinates.” He spun around, allowing his momentum to take him further away while still granting him a decent view of the scene, of both ships as they plunged toward the planet.
It was a phenomenal sight, watching the white beam pull the massive ship Dennis had landed on dozens of times before. The way it moved

seemed effortless as if it barely taxed the thing's power source. The coldness of it, the sheer fact it was a massive AI made it all the scarier. Whatever controlled it lacked any sort of mercy, any thought to what it was doing. Some program kicked off when it woke and it decided to drag the Gnosis along as a result. He wondered about the people who could have built such a thing, who might've had the know-how to generate code the likes of which made the drones formidable.

The two bombs deployed from the Gnosis, flying down then coming back up in a wide arch. The two veered slightly apart before they leveled out, heading straight for the enemy target. Whoever aimed them really knew what they were doing because their motion followed the two vessels perfectly, maintaining their target the entire time. When they connected, the resulting explosion shook the enemy vessel hard. It tilted away from the blast, thrusters going dark. *They did it!* Dennis thought. *I can't believe that worked! Incredible!*

"Gnosis!" Dennis shouted. "Gnosis, do you read? The thrusters on the enemy ship just went dark!" He checked his scanner. Power was still emanating from deep within the vessel, keeping the tractor beam on but they slowed down. "If you've got any power at all, you can probably get away! Please respond."

"This is Vincent. Still working on restoring systems. Hit the ship with everything you've got, Mustang. Make sure they're actually disabled."

"On it." Dennis tilted his head, focusing on the target. Two black marks marred the hull. That's what he wanted to hit. "You know what to aim for. Get those marks and we should punch right through." He glanced at the planet. At the speed the ship had been moving, they were nearly there. Another eight minutes at that speed would've brought them into orbit.

"Got it, sir," Shane said. "Let's make it happen."

The ships ignited their thrusters, darting forward toward their mark. Weapons blasted away moments later, hammering the enemy ship's hull. The blackened marks became bigger, turning to holes. They had to pull up, moving off to line up for a second attack run. "Good pass, guys. Let's take it out this time."

As Dennis set himself up, a flash caught his attention at the rear of the

enemy. The thrusters came back online. It started to move again.
"Crap! Get it! Get it! Get it!" They charged again, each of them going to town with their blasters. Much as he hoped they'd taken it down, it looked as if they might've been back to square one, or damn close at least.
"It's moving again," Dennis announced over the com to the Gnosis. "Repeat, it's moving again. You'll have to pull away if you can."
"We're working on it," Vincent said. "Don't let up."
"We won't." Dennis didn't have a lot of hope but he admitted there wasn't much else they could do at the moment. *Would be nice if the Stalwart could help*. He thought. *But let's see what we can do for a while longer*.

***

Rythi returned to the altar, pressing his hands against the two symbols. This time, he knew exactly what would happen and understood how to make the device work without causing himself quite as much trauma. Asti remained close, glaring at the marines. He smiled to himself as he let the process fall over him.
No matter what happens, at least I met her, Rythi thought. It was his last before the strange white room encompassed him again. *Here goes. Time to commune with the strangeness again*.
"You have returned," the voice spoke from everywhere, coming from the walls, the floor, even inside his head. "What is your query?"
"I cannot get to the terminal before a catastrophe happens," Rythi said. "I need you to shut down all AI ships. All drones, all vessels, they must be shut down! At once!"
"Complying …" The voice went silent for several long moments. "Units shut down. Error. One unit is not responding due to extensive damage. Error."
"Damn it! No!" Rythi pressed his forehead into his hand. "Why did it start bringing the ship back?"
"Identification of additional divine candidates was confirmed. Descendants."

“Even after you already found me?” Rythi shook his head. “This makes no sense!”
“Automation already in place prior to your discovery.”
“I see.” Rythi felt a sense of despair wash over him. He didn’t know what to do. This ship was going to drag these people into orbit, possibly do what they did to his ship and Asti’s. That would certainly seal some fates. Perhaps even his own. If only the drones hadn’t attacked …
A thought occurred to him. “Initiate all drones! Bring them back online.”
“Complying. Target protocols engaged. Aggressive vessels targeted.”
“Belay that!” Rythi fell back into his military days. “Acquire target damaged drone vessel. Send all available units to disable that vessel to free the captive one. Our *lives* depend on saving that ship!”
“Complying.” The voice spoke again. “Drones en route.”
“Thank you!” Rythi clenched his fists, hopeful this might work. “I need to disconnect to explain what’s happening. Thank you!”
Rythi slumped away from the altar immediately this time, coughing and sputtering. Asti helped him sit up and he struggled to speak. Two of the marines crouched in front of him, barking questions at the same time. He held up his hand to stave them off. He opened his eyes, swallowing back a lump in his throat.
“The ship’s too damaged,” Rythi muttered. “It can’t be stopped through this.”
“Damn it!” Fielding started to rise but Rythi lashed out, grabbing his arm. “Wait! I came up with an alternative. That ship needs to be disabled so I used all the drones. They’re on their way to take it out. Pretty sure with all that firepower, they’ll disable the ship. Yours will need to pull away though. I … know that their reactor is enough to do some serious damage.”
“Good idea,” Heat said. “I’ll send a com message back letting them know.”
“Hurry,” Fielding replied. “They’re probably getting a little desperate about now.”
Rythi slumped into Asti’s arms, staring up into her eyes. She ran her

fingers through his hair, her brows furrowed with worry. “You did well. That was much faster than the last time, too. If your idea works, you likely saved many lives.”
“Maybe,” Rythi muttered. “Providing this works. And those people are saved, yes. I did well.” He closed his eyes and rested. Whatever happened next was well out of his hands.”

***

Ulian’s screen lit up as several systems popped back up at the same time. His body lit up with excitement and he turned to Viran. “Did you get coms back up?” He asked. “Shields? Weapons?”
“Everything’s back online,” Viran replied. “Power is restored though several stations are recharging. Weapons will be ready in a few moments. Shields are at thirty percent and rising. Scans are …” She paused. “Sir, the enemy ships … the smaller ones … they’re powering up and flying away.”
“What?” Ulian scowled. “Which direction?”
“Same course as the one that took the Gnosis,” Viran said. “Fighters are pounding that larger vessel but they haven’t stopped it yet. They’re literally two to three minutes out from orbit. Uh oh.”
“Erda,” Ulian pointed at the pilot, “get us moving. I want to catch up to them as soon as possible.” He turned back to Viran. “What’s wrong?”
“Drones from the planet’s surface are flooding space … hundreds of them.” Viran slumped in her chair. “Possibly a thousand, the scans can’t keep up with the number.”
Morala perked up. “That’s easily enough to challenge the fleet, sir.”
Ulian nodded. “Yes, I’m aware of that.” He leaned forward, frowning at the screen. “Even with all our fighters, they have enough to give home base trouble. Why have they never ventured out to conquer another system? To challenge us on our own territory? Why hide here for so long with such power?”
“Incoming message from the ground,” Viran said. “It’s Aethon.” She paused. “Wait … this … please repeat, Aethon. What do you mean?”

She frowned at Ulian. “Sir, he’s saying the drones are friendlies. They are moving to engage the larger ship.”
“You must be joking.” Ulian stood. “Show me this on the view screen.”
A view of the planet appeared as hundreds of drones threw themselves into space. They headed straight for the large ship towing the Gnosis, letting loose a dizzying array of blaster fire. Some of them rammed the vessel, others buzzed about it like insects harassing the thrusters.
The massive craft did not retaliate but it also didn’t slow down. Despite the damage, it headed on, a stubborn beast of burden intent on arriving at its destination. “We have to help them,” Ulian said. “Get us over there, Erda. I’m sure they already know but inform all pilots to give those drones some space.”
“Do you think they’ll succeed?” Morala asked. “Stop the ship from pulling the Gnosis down?”
Ulian tilted his head. “We’ll soon know. If our allies don’t get their engines online, it might not matter.”

***

“Maneuvering thrusters aren’t enough,” Zach said. “I’ve got them at full strength but we’re not budging, even with our fighters hitting that thing.”
Desmond considered the situation. They’d hit their target hard but it only temporarily disabled the thing. Even with all the fighters hitting it with everything it had, the damn thing wouldn’t even slow down. Main thrusters might be enough to pull them away, especially with all the damage their captor was taking.
But they just weren’t there yet.
“Captain,” Salina’s voice came through the speakers. “I’m on scans down here with Commander Bowman. Good news, bad news. Apparently, the enemy drones have started in on this ship. I have word from our pilots that Heat and Fielding did something. Unfortunately, we’re going to enter the planet’s atmosphere in less than one minute.”
“Okay, strange but I’ll take it.” Desmond patched into engineering.

“Cassie or Webber, give me some good news, huh? What’s going on down there?”
“Shields are up,” Cassie replied. “We can take some damage … environmental or otherwise. Weapons … are charging too slowly to be of any use.”
“I’ve got the main reactor pumping to the thrusters,” Webber said. “We need about twenty seconds before we can fire.”
“We don’t really have that much time!” Desmond clenched his fists. “What can you do to make it happen faster?”
No one spoke for a moment. Cassie finally replied, “what about dumping all power from the weapon generators straight to the thrusters? We could hot start them that way and the reactor would have a chance to catch up.”
“That’s pretty risky,” Webber said, “but if it worked, we’d have main thrust in about fifteen seconds. If Zach controlled the bursts, we could pull away … or at least maneuver.”
“Do it!” Desmond shouted. “Hurry!” He moved over to Zach. “Plot us a course …” He paused as the ship shook violently. The view screen came online, showing they were entering the planet’s atmosphere. “Shit. You’re going to have to just keep us from crashing at this point. You got this?”
Zach bit his lip before finally nodding. “I will. Soon as we’re free from that damn tractor beam, sir. I’ll keep us in the air.”
“Engineering,” Desmond said as he took his seat. “Give me a countdown, folks.”
“Eight seconds,” Webber said. “Seven … six …”
The Gnosis entered the atmosphere. Their view screen showed the drones pounding their captor, some of the bigger ones plugging away. Desmond couldn’t believe it still had power and just when he began to think it might be invulnerable, the tractor beam let go. The enemy veered off, descending toward the surface with fire erupting from hull breaches.
He sat back in his seat and strapped in as their ship began to free fall. Zach used the maneuvering thrusters to slow their descent but it wouldn’t be enough to save them.

“Four … three …”
Desmond swallowed hard, staring at the screen, watching as the ground rapidly approached. The tractor beam dragged them further down than he thought possible. Their time to impact the surface was less than three minutes. That seemed like an eternity when their engines were supposed to come online momentarily.
But he felt like it wasn’t much at all.
“Two … one … dumping all power now!” Webber shouted the final part. The ship rattled, all lights winking out. The view screen disengaged but the helm console remained on, lighting up the room with a dull amber glow. Desmond held his breath as the engines kicked in. Zach’s hands moved over the controls like he was playing a complex classical piano piece.
Lights flickered overhead. Emergency red kicked on. The screen lit up. The ground looked incredibly close. Maneuvering thrusters pulled the nose up. Rear engines belted out, dragging them up despite gravity’s desperate work to pull them down. They skimmed several buildings, tearing them down as they slowly began to ascend.
“I’m having trouble gaining altitude!” Zach shouted. “I need more power, engineering! What can you give me?”
“Auxiliary power’s engaged,” Webber replied, “I’m dumping nonessential systems as well!”
The Gnosis leveled out, flying over the massive city toward the hills.
“I might have to make an emergency landing,” Zach said. “Something that won’t hurt too much.”
“No!” Webber cried. “We’ve got this. Tilt the nose up, I’m going to shock the reactor to get us back into space!”
“I’m on it.” Zach tilted the ship. Artificial gravity couldn’t keep up, or maybe didn’t have enough power, Desmond wasn’t sure. His stomach felt like they were falling like they were descending toward the surface, a carnival ride in the world’s largest roller coaster car. “Tell me when, Webber. We’re getting close to hitting the ground, buddy!”
“Engaging engines now!” Webber’s voice crackled through the com as the thrusters belched, pressing Desmond into his seat. He watched as the sky turned gray, the Gnosis screaming back toward orbit. Zach

continued tapping at his controls, constantly working to compensate as they climbed.

Zach turned his head so he could be heard over the rattle of the deck, the constant rumble of their engines. “We’re almost there, sir! Another twenty seconds of this burn and we’ve got it.”

“Engines are failing!” Webber called. “Can you attain orbit?”

“I’m working on it.” Zach turned to the left of his console, shaking his head. “Drop our shields into it if you have to. We can withstand the burn from here.”

The sky outside turned dark. The sound died away. Desmond slumped in his chair as artificial gravity kicked back in. They pulled away from the planet, the hull trembling a couple times before they escaped the gravitational draw.

“And …” Zach slumped in his chair, hands dropping to his side. “We did it.”

“Yes!” Desmond stood, slapping the pilot on the shoulder. He returned to his seat and yelled into the com, “well done, Webber! Initiate repairs immediately! Well done everyone! That … was quite certainly the craziest thing I’ve seen in my entire life. You should all be commended.”

“Appreciate it,” Zach replied, sounding spent. “I’m going to put some more distance between us and that planet.”

“Good idea.” Desmond rubbed his eyes before turning to his com. “Time to find out exactly what just happened … and why those drones came to our aid.”

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Epilogue

Cassie leaned back in her seat as their shuttle descended toward the planet's surface. The Pahxin fleet arrived before she even left engineering and immediately began the process of securing the perimeter. They stayed back as the Stalwart and Gnosis approached to determine exactly what they were dealing with.

Vincent sat beside her along with Gil. The latter wore a grave expression, staring into space. He'd been in his quarters throughout the battle, remaining out of the way but knowing him as Cassie did, she figured he would've rather been helping. There wasn't much he could've done during the conflict but that didn't stop him from beating himself up.

Ulian was on his way as well, flying down in a separate shuttle as their representative. The news surprised Cassie. She would've thought he'd send his second as Desmond had, but Pahxin protocols were different. The two ships were set to land together to meet up with the marines and a man named Rythi Cless.

According to Heat, they owed him their lives. He was the one that turned the enemy forces on each other. Without those drones firing on the larger ship, they may well have been crashed into the planet or worse. Considering it had been damaged, there was no telling what protocol it was following.

Cassie peered out the window, peering down at the landing pad they were approaching. The marines stood nearby, their armor making them stand out amongst the other people milling about. Heat's report suggested they found a large number of prisoners. The Pahxin volunteered to take care of them.

The Gnosis only had to figure out what happened and why they'd been drawn into a major battle upon their arrival.

Heat promised it would be easier to explain in person. He had to show them what they found and explain how Rythi fit into the situation. He'd been one of many kidnapped but something about him meant he was able to control the technology. That was something Cassie needed

to see to fully understand.
The shuttle came in for a landing. Vincent opened the back hatch for them, allowing Gil to go first. The archaeologist lost the severe expression the moment he walked down the ramp, his face lighting up with wonder. Cassie smirked as she disembarked. At least he got to see what they came all the way to find.
Heat and Fielding approached, each with their helmets off. They offered a salute to Vincent. The lieutenant gestured for them to follow.
“Welcome. I hope all this makes sense to you when we dive in. The good news is Rythi has assured us there will be no more attacks, no more ships going missing in this system.”
“How can he make that claim?” Vincent asked.
“Yes,” Ulian added. “I want some facts.”
“As we said,” Fielding replied, “he can control this technology. That’s why they’ve been taking ships. The automated system was programmed to detect a suitable leader for this culture, someone that could lead the inhabitants here to a better life. They are …” He cleared his throat. “Well … basically totally cared for.”
“What’s that mean?” Cassie asked.
“The planet takes care of them,” Heat explained. “The AI Rythi interfaced with is like the Orbs. It has all the data of the founders but their ancestors … they lost the knowledge of how to use the stuff. So they’ve been living here for generations, just waiting to reintegrate into some society … probably theirs but of course, we know it died out.”
“And what is this planet then?” Gil asked. He peered at his scanner as they walked. “This … this infrastructure is incredible. It seems like the whole place is a technological marvel.”
“According to Rythi, it is,” Heat said. “The interference we encountered was protective. It stopped that virus from getting here and it made it so no one casually scanned the area. Unfortunately, their camouflage was good enough to keep them totally isolated. And we now know their method of making friends left something to be desired.”
“Here he is now.” Fielding gestured to an approaching figure, dark

hair choppy about his head. A woman walked beside him, holding his arm as if she meant to help him keep his balance. “Rythi, this is Agent Cassandra Alexander, Commander Vincent Bowman, Doctor Gil Vaedra and Captain Ulian Hataran.”

“It’s good to meet you,” Cassie said as she stepped forward. “So what happens now, Rythi? What’s going on?”

“My intention,” Rythi explained, “is to save these people. The Pahxin have programs to re-integrate marooned citizens who have lost considerable periods of time. I hope we can come up with something similar to those. The inhabitants are simple folk but they can be taught … they can live full lives away from here.”

“But what happens to this place?” Vincent asked. “If you’re the only one who can control it.”

Rythi smiled. “But I’m not. I have access to the terminal now. I can show any of you how to do it but there are some, those who can trace their ancestry back to the founders, who can *directly* speak to the AI. That’s how I drove the drones to attack your enemy and how I have set the bots to work *for* us rather than *against*.”

“But,” the woman beside Rythi said, “it’s dangerous. It takes a toll on the body.” She turned to them. “My name is Asti. I’ve touched this AI mind and I can tell you, it’s incredibly powerful.”

“Sounds like the Orbs, right?” Heat asked.

“It does,” Gil replied. “What is this place capable of, Rythi? What all can we do?”

“What *can’t* we do?” Rythi asked. “The foundation can manufacture wonders and I believe you have the missing pieces to fully realize the potential of this world. The Trindishas hold the key to unlocking limitless potential. Another golden age as the original species of this technology intended … done with the humility required to work together.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Gil said. “My readings are showing unlimited power down here. Countless technological machines. Factories, storage, resources … I can think of half a dozen problems we could solve in a month with this place. Issues we’ve struggled with for *years*.” He turned to Ulian. “This place must be protected.”

Ulian nodded. “We’ll have to inform the council but for the moment, the fleet can remain.” He looked around. “Besides, after what I’ve seen, this place is rather formidable all on its own. Anyone that wants to come here would have to contend with quite the force. The question is what do we do until our leaders decide how best to take advantage of this?”

“Save the people,” Gil said. “Get them out of here so they can begin the process of reintegration.”

“There are some who will stay,” Rythi pointed out. “Those who know the ancient ways of maintaining the machines. They’ll be of aid to you to understand this place. Make no mistake, the intention was for one of us to come along and give us the ability to tap into these wonders. This is for us … it’s just taken generations to pass over.”

“I’d like to see it all in action,” Gil said, “can you take me to the terminal you were talking about?”

“Of course.” Rythi nodded. “Please, come with me. All of you. I’ll introduce you to the wonders of time immemorial.”

Cassie turned to Vincent, looking into his eyes. They hesitated as the others moved on. Once they were out of earshot, Vincent lowered his voice. “Do you think he’s on the level?”

“I do.” Cassie nodded. “This is the day that everything changes. The universe itself will never be the same.”

“How can one world have such an impact?” Vincent asked. “Even with all the technology they’re boasting, I don’t understand.”

“The Orbs advanced us far beyond where we were,” Cassie replied. “We developed faster than light travel, shields … now jump ahead another hundred years, perhaps a thousand. That’s what this place represents.”

“That sounds too fast,” Vincent said. “Like … we need to be cautious about how we introduce this.”

“I agree.” Cassie looked around. “I’m pretty sure our leaders will feel the same way. We can’t fall into the same trap as these founders or the people they gave technology to. Hopefully, we’ve learned our lesson through the Orbs though. Everything our ship has encountered, all the things we’ve seen … that should be enough to not screw up.”

“I think you’re overestimating humanity’s ability to learn from our mistakes.”
“No.” Cassie shook her head. “I’m just willing to have some hope.” She put her arm around him, leaning into his body. “I choose to be optimistic this time, standing on a world of wonders.” She tapped her com, reaching out to the Gnosis. “Desmond, you won’t even believe what’s going on down here.”
“Please tell me it’s not bad news,” Desmond replied. “Is everything alright?”
“More than,” Cassie said. “In fact, we might have just uncovered the greatest find of history. Our people, the Pahxin … the entire galaxy will benefit from this. Providing we treat it with respect, we could be seeing the dawning of a new era.” She smiled at Vincent. “A golden age of technology and peace.”
“I’m sensing a big *but* in your sentence,” Desmond said. “What’re you afraid of?”
Cassie considered the question for a long moment, turning to look at the retreating backs of her colleagues. Heat, Fielding, Gil, and Ulian all headed into the structure to see the technology. She returned her gaze to Vincent, muting her com unit. “Before I answer him, I wanted to tell you something.”
“Yeah?” Vincent tilted his head. “What’s that?”
“I love you.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek before engaging her com again. “Nothing. I’m not afraid of anything at all. It’s the first time I’ve been able to say that in months. Maybe that’s what I mean by a golden age. Maybe that’s what it means to embrace the wonders we’ve been led to. Either way, we’ll probably be a while down here.”
“Sounds good, Cassie,” Desmond said. “I look forward to hearing all about it when you get back … maybe I’ll pop down to see it for myself.”
“You should,” Cassie replied. “Alexander out.” She cut the connection and turned to head off after the others. Vincent took her arm, stopping her.
“Hey.” He leaned in, staring into her eyes. “I love you, too.” They kissed there, just off the platform of the shuttle pad. The sun went

down over the city while they embraced and lights blared from all the buildings, the technology moving into full repair mode. Automation churned around them, but neither Commander Bowman nor Agent Alexander noticed.

They were lost in a moment that made them human.

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